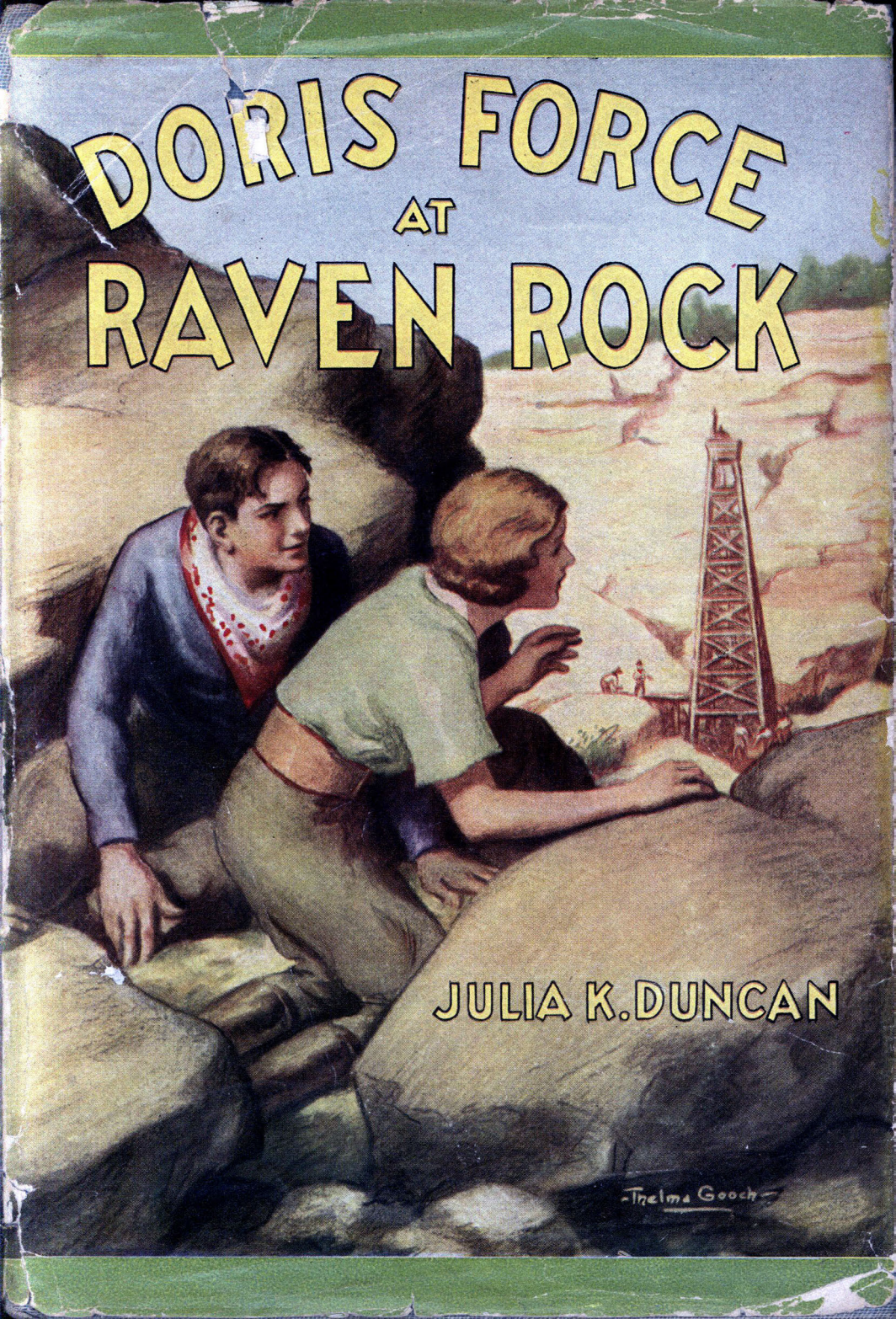
DORIS FORCE AT RAVEN ROCK



JULIA K. DUNCAN

Thelma Gooch

DORIS FORCE SERIES FOR GIRLS

By Julia K. Duncan

Doris Force is a charming and plucky girl of sixteen who, in trying to help others, finds herself having many interesting adventures. In each book she is confronted with a mystery, but this up-to-date miss is able to solve each one.

DORIS FORCE AT LOCKED GATES, or Saving a Mysterious Fortune

The Misses Azalea and Iris Gates, the white-haired twins who lived shut away from the world, summon Doris to help them out of an unusual circumstance. How Doris hears of strange unknown relatives and saves a mysterious fortune is told in a story full of action and humor.

DORIS FORCE AT CLOUDY COVE, or The Old Miser's Signature

Further adventures await Doris and her interesting friends when they attempt to uncover the secret concerning an old uncle who has not been heard of in thirty years. What happens during their stay at this summer resort—both the fun and the excitement—makes a book which the reader will not want to lay down.

DORIS FORCE AT RAVEN ROCK, or Uncovering the Secret Oil Well

Doris and her lively friends go West by airplane to hunt up a land claim about which there is a mystery. Exciting adventures follow one another until the plucky heroine, while endeavoring to outwit some unscrupulous persons, is completely swallowed up by a secret cave near an oil well. Her timely rescue makes the story fascinating to the last page.

DORIS FORCE AT BARRY MANOR, or Mysterious Adventures Between Classes

At the boarding school, Barry Manor, Doris and her chums have many good times. The search for the pearl necklace, and the uncovering of the mystery surrounding the forgetful Kate Tindell makes very exciting and interesting reading.

THE GOLDSMITH PUBLISHING CO.

CHICAGO NEW YORK

DORIS FORCE AT RAVEN ROCK

JULIA K. DUNCAN

GOLDSMITH

DORIS FORCE AT RAVEN ROCK

JULIA K. DUNCAN

GOLDSMITH

DORIS FORCE AT RAVEN ROCK

JULIA K. DUNCAN

Larue Bennett
Plattsburg, New York

DORIS FORCE

AT RAVEN ROCK

DORIS FORCE AT RAVEN ROCK

Or

Uncovering the Secret Oil Well

By

JULIA K. DUNCAN

THE GOLDSMITH PUBLISHING CO.

CHICAGO NEW YORK

Copyright MCMXXXI
H. A. Co.

MANUFACTURED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

CONTENTS

CONTENTS

Chapter		Page
I	An Arrival and a Robbery	5
II	No Time to Lose	15
III	Locked Gates Again	26
IV	The Scar-Nosed Man	36
V	Happy Landings!	44
VI	The Stowaway	52
VII	An Unscheduled Landing	60
VIII	Raven Rock	65
IX	At Crazy Bear Ranch	75
X	Nothing But Trouble	85
XI	Unpleasant Encounters—and Others	96
XII	"Buried Treasure"	103
XIII	A New Friend	112
XIV	The Clouds Gather	119
XV	Oil!	125
XVI	Plans	132
XVII	The Plot That Failed	141
XVIII	Doris's Disappearance	149

CHAPTER		PAGE
XIX	TWO MISSING	160
XX	ON THE TRAIL	168
XXI	SWALLOWED UP!	173
XXII	OLD DANNY'S GRUDGE	182
XXIII	DORIS'S VISITOR	188
XXIV	MOON'S PROBLEM SOLVED	194
XXV	FAREWELL TO RAVEN ROCK	204

CHAPTER I

AN ARRIVAL AND A ROBBERY

DORIS FORCE AT RAVEN ROCK

CHAPTER I

AN ARRIVAL AND A ROBBERY

DORIS FORCE was hastening down the shaded street toward her home. With bronze curls tossing and deep blue eyes flashing, she was a picture as she waved toward a car which had just pulled up to the curb in front of her home.

"Kitty! Kitty, you dear old thing!"

Doris's rich soprano voice, raised in excited greeting, was heard by her arriving chum, Kitty Norris.

Turning from the solicitous attentions of a stout youth who was helping her from an automobile, in itself something to look at twice by virtue of its obvious age and gaudy hue, Kitty Norris dashed down the street to meet her friend. The two girls embraced, Doris dropping her precious music roll, the better, as she put it, "to get a good grip on you again, Kitty!"

"I would have been at the station to meet you," Doris explained, "but my singing teacher did not have a free hour to substitute for mine—and there

is no way of telling how long we shall be away in the wild and woolly West. Are you all prepared for our journey? Oh, what a lovely dress, Kitty!" she added admiringly, holding her chum at arm's length in order to get a better look at her.

The two girls made a picture any artist might admire as they walked toward the house arm in arm, chatting gaily. "Marshmallow" Mallow was no artist, except when it came to composing menus, but he had appreciation enough for an academy of painters as he watched the girls approach, a suitcase in his right fist and a stylish grip-sack in his left.

"I had a real job coaxing Marshmallow to meet you in my place," Doris laughed as the girls came up to the youth, who had brought Kitty from the station.

"She argued all of two seconds by the clock," grinned Marshmallow, his chubby face dimpling. "Lead the way, Doris. These bags are heavy. I do believe Kitty has brought an armory of guns to slay redskins with."

"A little exercise will help you work up an appetite and you won't have to take your tonic," Doris said with mock gravity. Even Kitty laughed, for Marshmallow's ability to eat six full course meals, not including in-between snacks, amounted to pure genius.

Groaning and puffing with vast pretense Marsh-

mallow followed the girls up the flagstone walk to the pleasant house his mother owned, and a part of which she rented to Wardell Force, Doris's uncle and guardian, for their home.

Before the trio reached the door they were halted by a shout from the street.

A tall, keen-eyed young man, his face bronzed by sun and wind, vaulted the hedge and ran up to join them.

"Hello, everybody! Hello, Kitty! Welcome back to Chilton," he cried. "Say, but I have great news, Doris!"

"Hello, Dave Chamberlin!" laughed Kitty. "How's the air these days?"

Dave was an aviation student, already the proud possessor of a private flying license but toiling to amass the experience which would qualify him for a commercial pilot's certificate. Both girls had been his passengers on flights in borrowed planes which their owners did not hesitate to entrust to the youth, for his skill in the air was as great as Marshmallow's was with a roast chicken on a plate.

"Great news, Dave?"

Doris prompted the young flyer, who had been grinning wordlessly at her, deep admiration in his eyes.

"Grand and glorious news! It's a coincidence, and no mistake," he said, thoughtfully. "You can just cancel those reservations on the train!"

"What's the matter?" Marshmallow cried, disappointment written all over his face. "Has something turned up so we don't have to go out West?"

"No, no!" Dave laughed. "But you won't have to crawl across the continent in any old slow-poke mile-a-minute choo choo! You're flying!"

"Flying!" chorused the three.

"Yes, ladies and—er, gentleman," Dave laughed. "Of all the luck! Pete Speary is taking a big trimotor cabin ship to—guess where! No, don't guess! To Raven Rock!"

"What has that to do with us?" Marshmallow demanded.

"He'll take us with him!" Dave began to hop around in motions that were a cross between an Indian war-dance and an Irish jig. "He's taking me as mechanic, and you all as ballast!"

"Yee-ow!"

Marshmallow dropped the luggage and did a dance of his own that shook the porch.

"What is—is anybody hurt? Why, Kitty! How are you?"

The questions came from a pleasant-faced woman with graying hair who suddenly appeared in the doorway.

"What has happened to Marshall? Did a wasp sting him?"

"Oh, no, Mrs. Mallow," Doris laughed. "Dave just brought us amazing news. A great big cabin

plane is leaving Plainfield for Raven Rock, of all places, in a few days, and we are invited to fly West!"

"Fly—all the 2,000 miles?" Mrs. Mallow exclaimed. "Why, I haven't even flown a city block in all my life. No, I think I want that life to last considerably longer."

"Oh, Mother!" Marshmallow howled. "Don't throw a monkey wrench into the best luck we ever had."

"I think our trip will be dangerous enough," Mrs. Mallow said. "A great deal depends on us —at least, on Doris. Why should we take unnecessary risks?"

"Risks!" snorted Marshmallow. "Why, there is—"

"At least we need not discuss it here on the porch," Mrs. Mallow exclaimed. "Come in, Dave. Kitty, you must be tired and dusty. Marshall will carry your bags to Doris's room."

"Wait here and try to convince Mrs. Mallow, Dave," Doris commanded her friend in a whisper as she led her guest upstairs. "I will be right down."

Indeed, she was on Marshmallow's heels a moment later, and the two settled themselves to listen to Dave quoting endless statistics to prove to Mrs. Mallow that flying was far less dangerous than doing ordinary housework.

"I wish you could see the ships rolling in and out of a big airport, Mrs. Mallow," he said earnestly. "All day long one can see huge transport planes coming in from the Pacific coast, from Canada, from Florida, just like trains.

"There are waiting rooms and crowds of people no more excited than if they were taking the ferry to the Statue of Liberty. Red Caps are putting baggage in the planes and taking it out, men and women and little children land fresh as daisies not even hungry for supper, although they had lunch in a place six hundred miles away!"

"I'm going to take some sandwiches, just the same," Marshmallow murmured.

At this juncture Kitty entered the room, having refreshed herself after her journey. Although not as strikingly pretty as her chum and schoolmate Doris, Kitty was attractive enough to command attention anywhere. Indeed, with affected indifference, Marshmallow was not long in sauntering across the room to a seat beside her on the davenport.

"I know, I guess I am old-fashioned," Mrs. Mallow admitted. "But the thought of rushing through the clouds almost clear across the United States makes me uneasy."

"The plane is brand-new, Mrs. Mallow, but it has been tested under all sorts of conditions," Dave went on. "Pete did everything but fly her

upside down this morning. He told me she almost flies herself."

"Who is this Pete?" Mrs. Mallow asked cautiously.

"Pete? Why, Pete Speary!" Dave seemed surprised to find someone who did not know Pete. "He has flown thousands of hours with never an accident except when he was shot down in the World War."

"Oh, a war aviator!" Doris exclaimed. "How thrilling! Is he a hero, a real ace?"

"Ye-es." Dave showed a trace of jealousy in his voice. "He was in the famous Rochambeau Escadrille before we entered the war. He was only seventeen then. He became a captain in the American Air Forces, and on top of that he joined the Pulaski Escadrille of American aviators who enlisted to help the Polish Republic fight off the Bolsheviki.

"A hero? Why, he has dozens of medals. He was shot down in flames three times, and brought down thirty enemy planes!"

"I'm just dying to meet him!" Doris cried.

"And so am I!" exclaimed Kitty. "You will consent, Mrs. Mallow, won't you?" begged the girl earnestly.

"Huh, he must be kind of old by now," Marshmallow grunted, uneasy at Kitty's enthusiasm.

"Yes, he has a lot of gray hairs," Dave said with

obvious satisfaction. "And half of his face was rebuilt on account of wounds he received from the enemy."

"Oh, dear!" Mrs. Mallow cried. "I could not trust us all to a man in that condition, and one who is so ruthless and warlike!"

"Mother!" Marshmallow groaned. "You do think up the queerest things to be afraid of."

"I don't think that queer," Mrs. Mallow replied firmly. "But perhaps it is not kind to judge another's misfortune."

"Then you really will let us go in the airplane?" Marshmallow shouted.

"No-o, I'm not sure," Mrs. Mallow said.

"Please, please say yes," the others begged.

"Let Marsh drive you to the airport to look at the ship, Mrs. Mallow," suggested Dave.

"I know nothing about them," Mrs. Mallow replied. "That would not help me to decide. However, I will talk it over with Mr. Force. If he can see no objections, I will try to overcome my timidity."

"Whoops!" yelled Marshmallow. "Hooray!"

"I can't wait until Uncle Wardell comes home," beamed Doris. "It's only three o'clock—two hours to wait!"

"No, he will be early today," Mrs. Mallow said. "In fact, he should have been here before now. He has been at Lawyer Higgins's office since lunch

time going over the details of our errand at Raven Rock, and to get the all-important deeds to the property out there."

"Doesn't that sound thrilling?" Kitty asked, giving a little shiver of delight. "Oh, what an adventure to be party to!"

Mrs. Mallow excused herself and returned to the kitchen to supervise preparations for the evening meal.

The four youthful companions searched the bookcases for atlases, and were absorbed in studying maps and computing distances when the telephone rang.

"I'll answer it," Marshmallow sighed. "Gosh, imagine flying over the Mississippi!"

He went into the hall where the telephone was insistently ringing, while the rest studied the charts as if the trip were to be a circumnavigation of the earth via the two Poles.

A sharp exclamation from Marshmallow made them sit bolt upright.

"Doris, it's your uncle," Marshmallow said, his eyes wide with concern. "Something's happened!"

"Has he been hurt?" cried the girl, flying to the telephone and snatching the receiver. "Uncle Ward! Hello? Hello?"

"Doris?"

The familiar deep voice came reassuringly over

the wire, but the message it conveyed was so startling that for a moment the girl had to lean against the wall for support.

"Doris, this is Uncle Wardell. I am at the Plainfield police station. In the hallway of the office building I was struck down from behind and the important papers were stolen from me. No, I am not badly hurt—a big bump and a small cut. But the deeds to the property at Raven Rock are gone! And so are the robbers!"

CHAPTER II

NO TIME TO LOSE

CHAPTER II

NO TIME TO LOSE

"MARSHMALLOW! Get the car started!" shouted Doris as she hung up the receiver, but still grasped the instrument as if for support.

"He's outside starting the car now," Dave answered. "What's the trouble?"

"Is your uncle hurt?" demanded Kitty.

"Yes—robbed!"

Doris dashed out of the door and ran to the curb, where Marshmallow's car was throbbing and shaking as if only the strength of its driver could prevent it from rising straight into the air.

"He's at Police Headquarters," the girl gasped.

Marshmallow let in the clutch and the venerable car leaped forward six feet and came to a dead stop.

"Gee, the old bus always acts like this in an emergency," muttered the stout youth as he ground his heel into the starter button. The car responded with an angry whine, but no motion.

The car's balkiness, however, had given Dave and Kitty time in which to catch up with their friends.

"Here, put her in high gear and I'll push," Dave

shouted to Marshmallow. "Keep your clutch out until I yell ready!"

Beneath the thrust of Dave's strong shoulders the ancient automobile rolled along the street. As it gained momentum the youth commanded "Contact!" and sprinted for the running-board.

The car jolted crazily as the gears meshed, and then the decrepit motor roared into life. Marshmallow pressed the accelerator to the floor and the four friends were soon careening toward the city of Plainfield, of which Chilton was the chief suburb.

"Tell us what it's all about, Doris," Dave urged.

"I don't know myself, except that Uncle was struck and robbed of documents concerning which we were going out West," Doris responded. "Oh, hurry, Marshmallow!"

"Doing twenty-eight now," shouted the driver. "That's top speed for this locomotive, and eight miles over the limit at that."

By manipulating spark and choke throttles he did manage to swing the speedometer dial past the thirty mark, an accomplishment which so delighted Marshmallow that he forgot for the moment how serious his mission was.

He also forgot the existence of a traffic signal which flashed to red while the car was yet twenty yards from the crossing.

As the automobile dashed across the intersection to a chorus of squealing brakes and indignant

horns, a grim-faced motorcycle policeman kicked the starter of his machine and started in pursuit.

"Hey, young feller! I saw you go past that light!" the officer yelled as he drew abreast of the car. "I'm sick of you youngsters trying to set new speed records and I'll make an example of you. Follow me to headquarters!"

With these words, he roared ahead of the automobile, sounding his siren.

Marshmallow's round face was white with alarm, but his natural pinkness soon returned and a smile creased his lips.

"Some style to us, getting a police escort!" he laughed. "We're still doing thirty, and look at the traffic scatter for us!"

The imposing motorcade drew up before Police Headquarters in record time. To the policeman's amazement the four occupants of the car dashed past him up the steps and into the building, Doris leading the way. He was not far behind, however.

A headquarters' sergeant barred the way of the impatient quartet.

"Where are yez goin' in sech a hurry, now?"

"I've arrested 'em, Casey!" panted the motorcycle man, bursting through the doors. "Racing past a red light."

"Faith, Wheelock, and I nivver saw sich eager pr-risoners in me twinty years on the for-rce," the sergeant boomed.

Doris spoke up. "My uncle was robbed and hurt. He is in this building somewhere. Please take us to him."

"Is Wardell Force your uncle, me lass?" the sergeant demanded. "Come this way, thin. And be on your way, Wheelock. This puts a diff'rent light on the matter. Case dismissed, d'yez hear me?"

"Yes, Sergeant," Wheelock assented, and turned to the door without another word.

"Not that passin' red lights is any joke," said the sergeant as he guided the four through the corridors. "And not that bein' kinfolk of prominent people is any excuse for br-reakin' the law. But these is ixtinuary circumstances. Here's the chief av detictives' office and your uncle is inside."

Casey rapped at a plain oak door and without waiting for a reply threw it open.

Doris darted in first.

"Uncle Wardell! You are hurt badly!"

Mr. Force rose from the leather armchair he had been occupying. His head was swathed in bandages, yet he walked steadily toward his niece.

"Not at all," he exclaimed with a brave attempt at a laugh. "Just a bump."

The stout, ruddy-faced man with whom Mr. Force had been conferring arose and put a huge freckled hand on Doris's shoulder.

"He's telling the truth, Miss," he said. "You

have nothing to worry about. It's my worry to get the papers back that were stolen, and I think we shall do it."

"Bother the old papers," Doris exclaimed, hugging the man who had been both father and mother to her almost ever since she could remember.

"Oh, Mrs. Mallow! She'll be worried!" the girl cried suddenly. "We all rushed out of the house without telling her a thing."

"I'll call her up," Marshmallow volunteered.

"Never mind," Mr. Force suggested. "Just start right back for home. I'll go along, and we can tell her in person almost as soon as you could by 'phone.

"Good bye, Chief," he added, turning to that individual. "I know you'll do your best."

"The description you gave us of the robbers has already been received in every nearby city, Mr. Force," the chief said. "And our men will go through Plainfield with a drag-net. If they are here, we'll get them."

"Thank you," Mr. Force said. "Come, folks. Let's be on our way."

Back in the peace and comfort of the Mallow homestead Mr. Force leaned his aching head upon the softest cushion in the house and told the story of his misadventure.

"As I left Mr. Higgins's office," he said, "I nearly bumped into two men standing by the door.

One was tall and heavily built, the other was of medium height.

" 'Are you Mr. Force?' one of them asked.

"I replied that I was, and with that the tall one said, 'This is the hombre, Wolf!' and pinned my arms to my sides. I felt a sickening blow on the back of my head that left me stunned."

"How dreadful!" interjected Doris.

"The next thing I knew," her uncle continued, "I was trying to raise myself from the floor. My brief-case was gone and my coat pockets rifled. The men must have worked at lightning speed, for they were gone."

Doris gently readjusted the pillows, and made her uncle as comfortable as possible.

"Did they get all your money?" Dave asked.

"Not a cent! It was not money they were after," Mr. Force said. "The deeds to the ranch property at Raven Rock are gone!"

"Oh, the poor Gates twins!" Doris cried soberly.

At this point it might be well for us to recall Doris Force's previous adventures that have brought to the point of flying to the Southwest this girl, whose greatest ambition was to become a singer in grand opera.

Doris was an orphan, and until she unexpectedly spent some time at the home of the Gates twins, as recounted in the first volume of this series, "Doris Force at Locked Gates," she had believed Uncle

Wardell to be her only living relative. The twins, maiden ladies of past middle age, had made themselves known to Doris through a note inviting her to visit them at their old-fashioned mansion, Locked Gates, in a town some distance away.

There Doris had met a man who claimed to be a cousin, son of a maternal uncle, John Trent. John Trent had once been a suitor for the hand of one of the Gates girls, but which one not even they had ever learned. After a quarrel with their father, who died suddenly a few days afterward, John Trent had gone away and had never been heard of again until his alleged son had made himself known to the spinsters, under pretence of procuring a fortune left to them by his father.

How Doris exposed the faker and saved for the old ladies a fortune which they had long held but never suspected is told in the first book, but those adventures were but the beginning of a chain of events.

Doris, with a valuable ruby ring as a souvenir of her days at Locked Gates, set out to learn the identity and true fate of her newly-acquired uncle. There was excitement enough and plenty of fun, as her readers will recall, experienced in "Doris Force at Cloudy Cove," which is the title of the volume telling how this girl did find her uncle and reclaim him from years of life as a hermit.

Both John Trent and the father of the Gates

twins had invested in property in the Southwest a generation ago when land was cheap. Mr. Force had persuaded Trent and the sisters to establish their claims to the land, realizing that the passing years had increased its value manifold.

The task of establishing the titles and the more responsible work of trying to dispossess such squatters as might have taken up their abode on the land was to be undertaken by Doris, with the help of her loyal friends.

Kitty, her chum and roommate at Barry Manor boarding school, was to go along. Her share of the reward for exposing the criminal who had posed as Doris's cousin was ready to be spent, and a trip to the West with her chum appealed to Kitty as the best investment for some of the thousand dollars.

Now the documents which were the only proofs of the Misses Gates's ownership of the land had been stolen!

"Does that mean our trip West is useless?" Doris asked.

"On the contrary, the quicker some authoritative person gets on the scene the better," Mr. Force declared. "Unless the robbers are caught with the deeds on their person they will be in possession of the land."

"Something must have suddenly turned up to make the property very valuable," Doris observed.

"You are right, Doris," Mr. Force agreed. "For some reason it is highly important to some unscrupulous man to get that land. Just why, we do not know."

"I'll bet a gold-mine was discovered on it!" Marshmallow exclaimed.

"If a pie mine or some chocolate sundae wells were tapped, you'd probably take the deeds yourself," Dave accused his friend jokingly.

"No, all I'd ask for would be a spoon," the stout youth said dreamily. "It's too bad there aren't such things. You have made me strangely unhappy, Dave. I always thought this was a perfect world, but now I see it could be improved."

"Oh, hush, you two!" Kitty cried, half in earnest. "Marshmallow doesn't eat all the time. Please, Mr. Force, tell us what must be done."

Mr. Force, who had lapsed into deep thought, looked up at the young people.

"If I could possibly get away myself I would go to Raven Rock at once," he said. "But there is no way. The annual Community Chest drive is just about to begin and upon its success depends the well-being of the hospitals and charitable institutions of the city. I am director and treasurer. It would take four or five days before I could turn over the details to some other man.

"Mrs. Mallow, you have run your own affairs so competently I have every faith that you can help

us by going with Doris and the others as planned, but sooner. Tomorrow, if you can."

"Dave, tell Uncle Wardell—" Doris began.

The young man was bursting to give the information he had already imparted to the others.

"Mr. Force, a friend of mine, one of the country's most competent pilots, is flying a tri-motor cabin to Raven Rock this week. I am going as his mechanic. He has invited us to go with him, all of us."

Mr. Force's face presented a study of mixed feelings.

"It sounds like Providence," he said. "But also very dangerous. I don't know what to say."

"Say yes, Uncle," Doris begged. "There is no danger—no more than by train. Think of the time we shall save!"

"The thieves may have had ready a stamped envelope in which to mail the stolen papers as soon as they reached a letter box," Mr. Force mused. "Or they may have given them to confederates. Capturing them may not frustrate their plot. Tell me more about this pilot and the airplane."

"Hooray!" shouted Marshmallow.

In a straightforward manner and without exaggeration Dave told Mr. Force of Pete Speary's history, and the details of the new airplane.

"If Mrs. Mallow is willing, I will consent," said Doris's uncle.

"Oh, thank you!" Doris cried.

Then the young people turned eager and sparkling eyes upon Mrs. Mallow.

"I—really—flying!" she stammered. "But—well, I agree!"

"Then will you find out from your friend how soon he will start?" Mr. Force addressed Dave.

"Oh, Kitty!" exclaimed Doris. "Isn't it wonderful? Come upstairs. I'll pack at once!"

CHAPTER III

LOCKED GATES AGAIN

"We shall have to travel light," Doris spoke, throwing open bureau drawers and delving into their contents.

"I'm all packed," laughed Kitty. "Or rather, I'm not unpacked, which is the same thing."

"I wonder how long we shall stay," Doris said, lifting an armful of dainty undergarments from drawer to suitcase.

"Not very long, if we are to be at Barry Manor on registration day," Kitty reminded her.

"Won't the girls be jealous!" exclaimed Doris. "Miriam Collins and Shirley Dawson won't have half of the thrilling tales to tell about their vacations abroad, compared with ours right here."

"Let alone flying out West," Kitty added.

"There," commented Doris, "that's that, I guess. That tweed suit, six wash dresses and the taffeta ought to do, with the sweaters and blouses. Oh, I forgot. We'll probably have to do lots of riding!"

She darted to a cedar chest and brought out a riding habit which was still swagger despite evidence of hard wear.

"Now, where can I put my boots? I know, I

can roll up these undies and stuff them inside, and put my comb and brush and things in them, too," and suiting actions to words Doris soon had her packing completed.

"I have no such problem," Kitty commented. "My habit has long trousers and jodhpur half-boots. Dad gave me the outfit last Christmas."

"I remember," Doris said. "You look stunning in them, too, Kit. I need new things, but we have not had very much money to count on. But there, now I'm packed and ready. What shall we do until it is time to leave?"

As chimes sounded downstairs to announce dinner, Kitty laughed. "There's the answer for a part of our spare time."

"I hope Dave comes back soon with the information about the plane," Doris said, as the two girls left the room.

"Or even without it, I dare say," Kitty commented wickedly.

"Well, of course I'd like to see Dave any time, even if he didn't bring such exciting invitations."

"So I've noticed," Kitty added pointedly.

"I'm surprised you've noticed Dave at all with Marshmallow around," laughed Doris. "Oh, don't misunderstand me! I only mean that Marsh is so fat you can't see Dave."

"Marshall is not fat at all," defended Kitty.

With such good-natured teasing the girls entered

the dining room, where Marshmallow was waiting behind Kitty's chair.

"Mr. Force is not feeling well enough to eat," Mrs. Mallow said, entering the room and seating herself. "No, don't bother, Doris. I have sent Chloe up with a tray for him, to coax his appetite."

Even Marshmallow had not yet dipped his spoon into his soup when there was a ring at the doorbell and, without further ceremony, Dave admitted himself.

"Come right in and sit down for some dinner," Mrs. Mallow greeted him.

"Oh, excuse me. I didn't realize—" the youth began in embarrassment. "I hurried back to tell Mr. Force that Pete will take off early day after tomorrow."

"Come join us just the same," Mrs. Mallow urged. "Take Mr. Force's place. He will not be with us tonight."

The tempting odor of a savory soup was wafted to Dave's nostrils and completed the invitation.

"I really feel foolish, popping in right at dinner time like this," he said, as he sat down. "But your meals are nothing to refuse with any sincerity, Mrs. Mallow."

Between mouthfuls Doris and Kitty plied Dave with questions, and between mouthfuls he answered them. To Marshmallow there was no such thing as "between mouthfuls," but not needing his

ears in the serious business of eating he missed nothing.

"Can we get to Raven Rock in a day?" Doris asked.

"N-no," Dave admitted. "This ship has a cruising radius of eight hundred miles and a cruising speed of a hundred miles an hour. Let's get out some maps again after dinner and figure out the route."

"Shall we have to sit absolutely still all the time we are in the air?" Kitty wanted to know.

"No, you may dance if you want to," Dave grinned. "Probably Marshmallow will have to sit still in the middle of the floor, or he'll rock the boat."

"Shucks, I wouldn't ride in such a flimsy thing," Marshmallow retorted. "I'll drive over to Raven Rock in my little old car and get there first!"

The howls that greeted this boast made the chandeliers ring.

"Sh-sh," cautioned Mrs. Mallow. "Not so loud. Remember Mr. Force's headache!"

"Mr. Force! Say, I must give him the message from Pete!" Dave exclaimed. "May I go up?"

"Certainly, but make sure he is not asleep," said Mrs. Mallow. "His room is the first on the right, Dave."

The others arose from the table, and in the living room brought out again the maps and atlases

they had consulted earlier in the day. At that time the flight had been no more than a lark with scant probability of achievement.

Presently Dave rejoined them, reporting:

"Mr. Force is more certain than ever that we should fly to Raven Rock. He is afraid that if the party goes by rail the thieves will learn of it and try to do you harm."

"Then we start day after tomorrow!" Doris exclaimed.

"At dawn," Dave added.

"Dawn!" echoed Marshmallow with dismay. "Not before breakfast!"

"I'll have your breakfast before you are up," put in Mrs. Mallow. "I know I shan't sleep a wink the night before—or tonight, for that matter, thinking about flying."

"Why, Mrs. Mallow, there is less danger than if you were driving in a powerful sedan driven by the best chauffeur in the country," the young aviator said.

"Here, Dave, show us the route we will take," Kitty chimed in. "Perhaps she will feel differently."

"Well, I rather think Pete will follow the regular air mail route," Dave said, leaning over a map of the United States. "That means he will head for Cleveland or Pittsburgh, then dip down toward Cincinnati and head in at Indianapolis."

"Cleveland or Pittsburgh the first night, and Cincinnati the second," Kitty counted off. "Then Indianapolis the third day—"

"No, no!" Dave was laughing. "Indianapolis the first night, at least."

"From here to Indianapolis in one day?" Mrs. Mallow asked, astounded.

"That is easy and conservative flying," Dave assured her. "We shall get to Indianapolis by mid-afternoon without hurrying."

"I—oh, dear, I'm afraid I'll never catch up with the times," Mrs. Mallow sighed.

"There's a whole day to wait," Doris commented. "And nothing to do. Kitty and I are all packed and ready. What shall we do tomorrow?"

"Let's go for a picnic," Marshmallow suggested.

"Good id—no." Doris pondered a moment. "Instead, will you drive Kitty and me to Rumson?"

"Sure," Marshmallow agreed. "Why?"

"I think we ought to see the Gates twins and tell them all about what has happened—and what is going to happen."

"Good idea, maybe," Marshmallow grunted. "We'll picnic on the way, just the same."

So, with the annoying detail of a day's tedious waiting taken care of, Doris and Kitty went to bed intending to discuss until after midnight plans

for their trip, but to their own surprise went almost immediately to sleep.

Soon after breakfast the next morning they were rolling along the state highway bound for Rumson, Marshmallow at the wheel of his ancient but gaudy automobile. With them went Wags, Doris's pet dog, who in the excitement of the past day or two had been rather neglected.

"Where shall we eat?" Marshmallow asked, before they had traveled twenty miles.

"Let's have lunch at the same place we did the first time we made this trip," Doris suggested.

"That's where you found Wags," Kitty said.

"And where we saw that horrid man who said he was my cousin," Doris added. "Ugh! I can't forget him."

"Nor could I forget a man like that," Marshmallow chuckled. "No, sir, not if his claiming to be my cousin paid me $1,000 reward for proving he wasn't."

Lunch was eaten at the spot crowded with thrilling memories, and Locked Gates, the home of the elderly twin spinsters whose lives Doris had so radically changed, was reached in short time thereafter. Contrary to many people, Marshmallow was always most active after a good meal.

"I have to work up an appetite for the next," he explained.

Locked Gates was still Locked Gates, in so far as

the wrought iron entrance gave its name to the old mansion. The Misses Gates had locked the portal thirty years before, after their father and their suitor had passed through it for the last time.

In other respects the house was transformed. The bushes had been trimmed and the ancient fences were newly painted. No weeds grew in the pathways now.

Marshmallow drove to the other entrance which was now the main gate, and accompanied the girls to the door.

In contrast to the surly Henry Sully, who had grudgingly admitted them upon their first visit, a trim maid opened the door for the callers and ushered them into the living room. To Doris's pleasure this had not been changed a particle. It was still the dignified but livable room of soft light, polished century-old mahogany and deep-piled antique rugs.

"Welcome! Welcome!" a charming voice spoke from the hall doorway. Two voices, as a matter of fact, but they sounded as if uttered from the same throat.

Azalea and Iris Gates looked as much alike as their voices sounded. They entered the room side by side, identically clad in dove-gray chiffon, their white hair framing surprisingly youthful faces.

"When are you off to the West?" was their first query, after greetings were exchanged.

"Tomorrow, by airplane," Doris said happily.

"How very modern and exciting!" Azalea exclaimed. "I suppose the young gentleman who was often flying overhead while you were here is to be the engineer, or whatever he is called?"

Doris felt her cheeks grow pinker.

"He isn't experienced enough to fly a huge cabin plane," she said. "He could do it, of course, but he has to do a certain amount of flying before he can be licensed to pilot one. Dave is coming as assistant to the pilot."

"That reminds me," Iris said, "a couple of men came here yesterday—no, the day before—and asked if we would sell the Raven Rock property."

"It must be valuable, as your uncle claims," her sister added.

"What were the men like?" demanded Doris. "Please describe them. I have a special reason."

In as few words as possible she told of the attack on Mr. Force and the theft of the deeds. The Misses Gates were visibly shaken by the recital.

"One man was tall and thick-set, burly, I should say," Azalea began. "He wore rather eccentric clothing, I thought. Good enough, but rather—noticeable. He was quite tanned and had very bright, dark-blue eyes."

"His hair was just brownish," Iris added. "He didn't have any outstanding characteristics, except his voice, which was sort of drawly and yet nasal."

"The other one looked like an Indian," Azalea said. "He said nothing all the time he was here. He was about medium height, and spare, with very black eyes and hair and bronzed skin. He had a scar across the bridge of his nose, I remember."

"They said they were planning to build a—what was the funny expression, Azalea?"

"A—let me see, now. Oh, a dude ranch!"

"We told them that Mr. Force had our deeds and other papers and was consulting a lawyer in Plainfield about them," Iris concluded.

"Then they left in a hurry," Azalea added.

"And trailed Uncle Wardell and robbed him," Doris concluded. "What's more, they got away."

"Ah, how dreadful!" exclaimed the white-haired twins simultaneously.

"But we'll catch them!" exclaimed Doris. "We'll get to Raven Rock first and stop their crooked work!"

CHAPTER IV

THE SCAR-NOSED MAN

"Good luck, Miss Force. Please to take extra good care of that so lovely voice of yours."

"Of course I will, Professor Von Heflinger," Doris assured her singing teacher.

"What effects on the voice such high altitude have got, I do not know," the professor said dubiously. "You are on the threshold of a great career, or else Wolfgang Von Heflinger never heard a note. Be careful, please."

"Indeed, I assure you," Doris laughed, pleased with her instructor's confidence. "It was very, very good of you to come to my home to say 'auf wiedersehen.' "

With a courtly, old-world bow the professor took his leave and Doris went back to the breakfast table, where Kitty, Mrs. Mallow, her son, and Mr. Force were completing their meal.

It was eight o'clock on the day of the proposed flight to Raven Rock. Within an hour they would be in the air, speeding westward.

"Now, Marshmallow, if you'll warm up *your* tri-motor or half-motor or whatever it is, we'll get ready to start!"

Doris danced around the room and halted with her arms around her uncle, thereupon giving him a few last minute bits of advice on taking care of himself.

"Before you know it we'll be flying back on the wings of success," she concluded grandly.

"I'm sure of it," Mr. Force said. "Meanwhile, I shall be very comfortable here and ready to come to your aid if it takes more than a week to conclude your task."

"Let's get started, everybody!" Doris cried. "You know that plane is scheduled to start at a certain time and it won't wait for us, if we're late."

Soon the baggage was in the automobile and the family gathered in the living room for final farewells to Mr. Force.

"Let's go!" Marshmallow commanded gaily.

"Dear me, dear me!" wailed Mrs. Mallow. "I'm so nervous I can hardly stand up! I'm just plain frightened to death!"

"Shucks, Mother, you haven't anything to be afraid of!" Marshmallow uttered. "Dave and I are a match for any pair of desperadoes you ever heard of, and we'll have the law on our side, too!"

"It isn't th-that," Mrs. Mallow said, her teeth chattering. "It's the thought of g-going up in an airplane."

Mr. Force bent solicitously over the agitated woman. He was afraid she might become ill.

"My dear Mrs. Mallow," he said, "if I thought there was any danger, I should not allow Doris or any of you to go."

"You'll soon be all right, Mother," Marshmallow laughed. "When the trip is over you'll be wanting to buy a plane of your own to go shopping in!"

He put his sturdy arm around her, led her from the house and literally lifted her into the auto. The others followed.

Marshmallow put his car into gear and it shot forward.

"Excuse me, Mother, for hurrying you," he shouted above the roar of the motor, "but we are late now."

Doris and Kitty, in the rear of the car, could not help but feel sympathy for Mrs. Mallow.

"Just the same, she gives me a hunch this trip is due for trouble," Kitty remarked. "I'll bet we crack up, or make a forced landing in the desert somewhere."

"There are no deserts between here and Raven Rock," scoffed Doris. "Buck up, Kitty! See how brave Marshmallow is. He wouldn't let you get hurt for worlds."

Marshmallow settled into silence and gave his full attention to getting the maximum speed out of his car.

The airport was some distance outside the Plainfield city limits, and soon the car was rocking and

careening along the state highway, which was bordered by orchards and truck gardens.

From the laden apple and peach trees came odors as delicious as any blossoms' fragrance, and even Mrs. Mallow was enjoying the beauty of it all, when without warning an ear-splitting report rang out and the car bumped to a swaying halt, well off the road-bed.

"Oh, what's the matter!" cried Mrs. Mallow.

"Marshall, are you hurt?" Kitty screamed, as Marshmallow climbed out of the car, ruefully rubbing himself.

"No, not much. Got a hard bump against the steering wheel," he said. "But isn't it just our luck to have a tire blow out?"

The one on the rear wheel was practically in fragments. Philosophically, Marshmallow opened the tool box, extracted a wrench and a jack, and began the task of replacing the blown tire.

"It is twenty minutes to nine now," Doris said, looking at her wrist watch. "Oh, dear, we can never get there in time!"

"Maybe—you'd better walk—down to that house and call up the airport," Marshmallow wheezed. "Tell Dave we'll be only fifteen minutes late. Maybe they'll wait for us."

"Oh," exclaimed Kitty, "wouldn't it be dreadful if they went without us?"

"You stay here with Mrs. Mallow, Kitty," Doris

said hurriedly. "There is a lunch stand or something at that house, I remember, so there's probably a 'phone."

Quickly she strode along the road to the dwelling visible at the turn of the road a quarter of a mile distant. The fragrant air, spiced with the first promise of autumn, exhilarated Doris, and even in her anxiety she began to sing from the pure joy of it all, one of her favorite songs, Tosti's "Goodbye." The melody poured from her throat in a manner that would have swept a crowded concert hall.

"Better hush up," she told herself as she approached the house. "They'll probably think I'm silly."

She was glad that she had stopped singing, for just as she reached the bend in the road a man in overalls came hurrying from the opposite direction. He glanced at her in a surprised way, acted as if he were about to stop, but went on without speaking. Doris was glad he moved off.

The building that was her goal was set in a grove of dusty and scraggy willows. Once it had been a spacious farmhouse, but now there were metal stools and round tables on the porch, while scores of signs tacked to pillars, walls and even the trees advertised this and that soft drink, confection, ice cream or sandwich. One prominent notice advised the public that here also were "Boarders Took by Week or Month."

Only one sign attracted Doris's eye, however, and that was the blue and white announcement that telephone booths were to be found indoors.

A drowsy waitress directed Doris to the end of a large, bare room where there were two varnished telephone booths. Doris saw that one was vacant.

She inserted a nickel in the slot and gave the number of the administrative office at the airport.

"Line's busy. We will call you," the operator said, and Doris leaned against the scribbled wall to wait. Unconsciously she listened to the words of the man in the next booth, and suddenly became all attention when the significance of the conversation dawned on her.

"—we been layin' low but de hunt's got cold, so we start for Rock dis day. See? Never mind, nobody lis'en, Jefe! Wat dat? Hey, long dee-stance! Git off de wire. Sure I pay you w'en I feenish. Allo! We start today wid de deed, you savvy? Bueno!"

There was a click of the receiver; then the man's voice again asking how much he owed for the call. Doris heard coin after coin rattle into the box, and then the speaker stepped out of the booth.

Doris cowered in the back of her own cubicle as the man, pausing to adjust his hat, caught sight of her. Evidently he had not been aware that she was in the next booth, for amazement and suspicion flashed across his face.

What a face! A face never to be forgotten!

Beneath the broad hat-brim it leered at the girl evilly. Black, very black eyes above high, bronze cheek-bones, and a mouth that was extremely straight and thin.

"Here is your party. Go ahead, please," spoke the operator's voice into Doris's ear.

Doris could not speak.

Over the man's nose, from cheek to cheek, there ran a vicious scar, almost blue against his copper-colored skin.

"Hello! Hello!" dinned impatiently through the receiver into her ears. "Anybody there?"

As the scar-faced man spun about on his heel and vanished from the room, Doris turned with a catch in her throat and spoke into the mouthpiece.

"Dave—David Chamberlin, please."

It seemed a long time to Doris, waiting in the stuffy 'phone booth, before an attendant found Dave. The young aviator had taken a stand near the entrance gate to watch for the arriving party, and was passing the time by speaking to his many pilot friends who were coming and going through the main thoroughfare.

"Chamberlin! Hey, Chamberlin!" shouted a uniformed boy. "You're wanted on the telephone!"

Dave covered the ground like a trained sprinter. "Could something have happened to his friends?"

he suddenly wondered as he neared the office breathlessly.

"Hello, hello!" he shouted eagerly.

"Dave," answered Doris, "we're coming, but we'll be fifteen minutes late. Please don't go without us!"

CHAPTER V

HAPPY LANDINGS!

"DON'T worry! The plane won't pull out without you!"

Dave laughed as he shouted his greetings to the quartet—quintet, if we include Wags—as Marshmallow's auto roared to a halt in front of the airport's administration building about twenty minutes after Doris's 'phone call. It was a small brick structure dwarfed by the two hangars which flanked it on either side.

"We'd have caught you at the next stop," growled Marshmallow amiably, as he switched off his shuddering motor. "Where can I stow this car until we come back?"

"Oh, one of the mechanics will shove it into a corner of a hangar," replied Dave, his dark eyes sparkling as he helped Doris descend.

"This way, folks. Here, give me those bags!" Thereupon the tall young aviator, topping everyone else in the party by at least a head, strode into a hangar, a grip in either hand and a suitcase under one arm.

There was only one airplane in the huge shed, a two-place pleasure craft with open cockpits, and

at the sight of it Mrs. Mallow's knees slumped once more.

"No, sir!" she said as firmly as her trembling chin permitted. "I won't crowd into that little plane for such a long trip."

"That isn't our ship, Mrs. Mallow," laughed Dave. "Wait till you see her. She's a beauty!"

He continued through the hangar to the flying field on the other side, and even Mrs. Mallow gave a gasp of admiration at what they saw there.

Poised on the ground like a giant silver dragonfly was a tri-motored all-metal monoplane, its aluminum paint flashing like silver in the morning sun. The three propellers were revolving idly.

"Isn't that the grandest sight human eyes ever rested upon?" Dave exclaimed. "Except you, Doris," he added under his breath to the lovely girl beside him. If Doris heard she gave no sign.

"It—it looks very competent," Mrs. Mallow admitted.

"Come over and look inside," Dave urged. "Pete is just revving up the motors a bit."

A little group of admiring mechanics and hangers-on moved respectfully aside as the party approached the plane.

Dave opened a door in its side, half way between wing and tail, and pulled out a folding stepladder.

"Hi, Pete!" he called. "We're all here!"

A moment later a slight, pink-cheeked young-

looking man, for all the streaks of gray in his blond hair, appeared in the doorway and climbed down to the ground.

Dave made the introductions.

"Pete Speary, one of the best pilots ever to leave the ground," he concluded.

"I'll have to agree to that myself to make you all feel more comfortable when we are up," Pete laughed, bowing.

Then they all climbed in, Mrs. Mallow warning the pilots not to take off without giving her one more chance to put her feet on the earth.

Everyone marveled at the luxurious interior of the plane. Walls and ceiling were covered with green mohair, as were the four swiveled bucket seats, two on either side and each opposite a window. A hinged lap-table was folded back under the windows.

"It's marvelous, but there are only four seats," Doris said. "Where do we all sit?"

"Oh, I ride in the engineer's cab up forward," Dave replied, pointing to a glass-walled compartment in the nose of the ship, about three steps higher than the passenger compartment.

"See, she has dual controls," he indicated, as Doris and Kitty peered inside.

"What are all those dials and clocks and gadgets?" Kitty demanded.

"In simplest terms, they tell how fast we are

going, how level we are flying, if we are drifting sideways, the gas and oil pressures and other tips on the mechanical condition of the ship," Dave told her.

They all climbed out of the plane again, and Pete excused himself to attend to some final details in the administration building.

"I don't know, it all looks solid enough," Mrs. Mallow sighed. "Too solid to fly up in the air with us all. But I don't like your Pete."

"Pete? Why, he's the salt of the earth," Dave exclaimed. "Why don't you like him?"

"I can't trust a man who smiles on only one side of his face," Mrs. Mallow declared firmly.

"Pete can't help that," Dave protested. "That side of his face he doesn't smile with was all smashed up during the war and had to be rebuilt. The doctors made him as good looking as he ever was, but they couldn't make the muscles work as well."

Immediately Mrs. Mallow was all concern and sympathy, ready to mother the hero.

"I think he's handsome," Doris said. "And a real, live hero, too."

Dave scowled.

"That doesn't help him as a pilot," he said. "It isn't my fault I was only a child when the war ended, or that I was blessed with the complexion of an Indian."

"Indian!" Doris exclaimed. "Oh, Dave, please —" Then in a whisper, "Walk over this way with me as if you were talking about the airplane. Why, I think you are mighty good-looking, you big ninny, if that makes you feel any better. Now let's be sensible, Dave. Are any other planes leaving from here for the West today?"

"No planes scheduled to leave for anywhere," Dave said. "Only private ships are left. Why?"

Doris told him of the conversation she had overheard in the telephone booth.

"The man exactly fits the description of one of the thieves who attacked Uncle Wardell," she added.

Dave whistled.

"I'll run over and telephone to your uncle and to police headquarters," he said. "We can't lose any time hanging around ourselves, that's clear."

He dashed over to the office, passing Pete who was returning. That person, still wearing his lopsided smile, lifted the baggage into the plane and stowed it away in a padded compartment in the tail of the fuselage.

"Now we're all set, as soon as Dave arrives," he said.

"Don't you wear any uniform or helmet?" Kitty asked, looking at the aviator's neat gray business suit and battered fedora hat.

"Not in this de luxe job," he replied, waving to-

ward the cabin. "It's like flying in your own living room at home."

"You know," Doris said, "I don't yet understand our good luck. How does it happen you are flying to our destination in this beautiful thing?"

"Why, it's like this," Pete replied. "Lolita Bedelle, the opera star, has a big ranch near Raven Rock. Lots of moneyed people have ranches all through that section—not dude ranches, either. They make 'em pay dividends. This Miss Bedelle has taken up flying so she can look over her 500,000 acres and visit her neighbors. She had this plane fitted up for her, and I got the assignment of delivering it."

"Lolita Bedelle!" Doris exclaimed. "I've always admired her. I heard her as Marguerite in 'Faust' once and dozens of times on the radio. Maybe I'll have a chance to meet her!"

At this juncture Dave ran up.

"All aboard!" he shouted. "No reserved seats. Pile in, everybody, and let's go!"

In the flurry that followed his words he whispered in Doris's ear, "I couldn't get your uncle but I gave the police the news. They're getting busy."

"That's good!" replied Doris. "Thanks, Dave!"

When all were seated, with the exception of the excited Wags who insisted upon trying everyone's lap, Dave shut the door and bolted it. As he

climbed into the pilots' compartment, he waved to the crowd outside. From it arose shouts of "Happy landings!" the aerial farewell.

"This is better than a Pull—" Doris began, but her voice was drowned out as the huge motors roared into life. The body of the plane trembled, and Doris saw Mrs. Mallow, who had the seat in front of her, grip the arms of her chair as the color ebbed from her cheeks.

Jerkily the huge aircraft began to move over the ground. Faster and faster flitted the scenery past the windows and then suddenly the plane seemed to stand still. The motors' staccato roar evened to a resonant hum.

The passengers looked outside. Already far below them, and oddly tilted, lay the airport.

"How do you feel?" Doris shouted to Mrs. Mallow.

"Not as bad as I did a minute ago," that lady called back. "But not as happy as I was last week!"

Except for an occasional tremor or the least perceptible dip to one side or another the airplane was as steady and even-keeled as a ferryboat at anchor.

Doris looked forward to where Dave's broad back could be glimpsed through the glass partition. She saw him point forward and a little to his left.

She peered in the direction Dave was indicating to his partner.

Those who have flown will remember the peculiarity that the horizon is always on a level with the eyes, no matter how high one rises above the earth.

Doris saw that a portion of the horizon was blotted out by a towering mass of boiling clouds that seemed to rush upward from behind the earth's curve. Of course it was the speed of the plane that gave that impression, as it rushed toward the storm.

A thunderstorm! And a bad one!

"If Mrs. Mallow sees it, she will jump out," Doris thought. "She is scared enough of storms in her own house, and here we are diving into one a mile above the earth!"

Her worry grew as she watched the two pilots signaling to each other and looking behind them with knitted brows.

Was disaster to overcome the trip at its start, as Kitty had foretold?

CHAPTER VI

THE STOWAWAY

RIGHT into the vortex of the storm headed the airplane, and now Mrs. Mallow became aware of the danger ahead.

Doris saw her grow tense again, saw her hands clutch the arms of her seat.

"Don't worry," Doris called, leaning over the older woman's shoulder. "The pilots know what they are about."

"They don't know how frightened I am of the thunder, though," Mrs. Mallow replied. "I don't mind lightning. It's the thunder I hate."

"Then you are safe," said Doris. "I never heard of thunder hurting anyone yet. Besides," she added, "Dave told me lightning can't hurt an airplane because there is no place for the electricity to ground."

"The ground would look wonderful to me now, if I were only on it," Mrs. Mallow answered.

"Look, we're turning!" Doris exclaimed. "We are going around the storm."

As if the storm were painted on a canvas that giant hands were rolling up, the serried clouds passed before the front windows of the giant craft.

"Oh, how funny the ground looks," shouted Kitty. "It's all tilted up."

Mrs. Mallow looked down, and fascinated by the sight, stared at the tricks the solid earth appeared to be playing. The plane was banking on the left wing as it described a huge arc. The passengers felt as if the ship was still on even keel, and not tilting, giving them the optical illusion familiar to all who have journeyed in the air that it was the ground tilting beneath them.

Now the airplane was flying at right angles to the storm's progress, and in ten minutes left it far astern.

"Now we are picking up our course again," Doris explained to Mrs. Mallow. "See, we are turning toward the right, and there is the Delaware River under us."

"That little thing the Delaware?" Mrs. Mallow marveled. "Oh! What's that? Doris!"

The plane began to buck, like a boat breasting a heavy surf.

Doris had all she could do to hold on.

In a moment the pitching ceased and again the airplane darted ahead.

"We are over the Alleghenies," Doris told Mrs. Mallow, pointing down to the mountains below. "The air is always bumpy over the mountains."

It was beyond Mrs. Mallow's comprehension, and she shook her head in resignation.

From time to time the airplane seemed to drop five or six feet like an elevator starting down from a skyscraper. Again it was tossed aloft, as the eccentric air currents caught it.

"Dave and Pete seem worried," Doris said to herself, as she watched the two pilots exchange control of the ship and then compare notes.

"Oh, dear, why don't they land somewhere if they are not sure the ship is acting right?" the girl asked herself. A glance showed her that Kitty and Marshmallow were also aware that something was wrong.

The pilots seemed to come to some decision, for Speary poked the nose of the ship upward and the plane began to climb.

"To think I should ever see the top side of a cloud!" Mrs. Mallow exclaimed.

The thunderstorm had long since passed out of sight, but thousands of fleecy clouds were scattered below, which looked like sheep grazing on a lawn, yet in reality were the ranges of the Alleghenies.

Doris looked at her wrist watch.

"At last, something to take our minds off our troubles," she thought, reaching for the wicker lunch basket beside her seat.

"Twelve o'clock! We eat!" she called out.

Marshmallow looked vastly happier.

Everyone followed his example of raising the drop-leaf table at each seat. Doris distributed

paper cups and tissue napkins, waxed cardboard plates and spoons.

Thermos bottles of hot cocoa and iced tea circulated, while Doris handed around dainty lettuce, chicken salad and olive sandwiches, as well as more substantial ones of tongue or ham.

"It gives me the creeps to think there is about a mile of air under my feet," Kitty said to her as she passed her chum.

"But the walking is as easy as in my own bedroom," replied Doris.

She took sandwiches to the pilots, together with a vacuum bottle of tea.

The roar of the great motors was infinitely louder in the pilots' compartment. Dave grinned at Doris and his lips moved in speech, but the girl could hear no words.

He pointed to a dial on the instrument board and Doris saw the figures 44 indicated. She shrugged her shoulders to indicate that she did not understand.

Dave pulled out a pad and pencil and wrote:

"Four thousand four hundred feet up."

Bracing herself against the pilot's seat, Doris took the pencil and paper and wrote a question:

"Isn't the plane working all right? You and Mr. Speary seemed worried."

Dave read the question while chewing on a sandwich, and took the pencil to reply.

"Excuse me for talking with mouth full," he wrote. "The ship seems a little heavy by the tail but no worry."

Nodding her thanks and demonstrating her full confidence in Dave by a smile that made the young airman choke on his rye bread, Doris turned back to her seat and her own lunch.

She saw that Mrs. Mallow had only nibbled at one sandwich.

"Are you sick?" she asked.

"I'm surprised I'm not, I always get so seasick on a boat," Mrs. Mallow replied. "But I certainly have no appetite. The ground has disappeared."

Doris glanced below and saw that the plane was traveling over a sea of milk-white clouds.

"It's raining down there," she told Mrs. Mallow. "Aren't we lucky to be up here in the sun?"

Mrs. Mallow's reply was a meaning look and an emphatic shake of the head.

She was not yet an aviation enthusiast.

Doris thought it best under the circumstances to keep silent about the pilots' concern over the sluggish response the ship paid to the controls, and philosophically ate her food.

"If we should have to land—good night!" she thought. "The ground is out of sight."

As if to add to her worries the airplane suddenly yawed to the left, bringing a howl from Marsh-

mallow. He had just lifted a cupful of iced tea to his lips and the unexpected motion sent the icy fluid cascading over his chest.

Mrs. Mallow and Kitty were so overcome with the ludicrous accident they did not see the pilots' evident alarm.

Doris saw Speary turn the controls over to Dave and rise from his seat.

He was smiling his sideways grin as he entered the passenger compartment, holding to the backs of the seats to steady himself, because the ship was again swaying and dipping in the air.

"Going to get something from the baggage box I forgot," he called out cheerfully, but Doris saw that his troubled eyes belied the look on his face.

"He's not going to get anything from the baggage compartment at all," she told herself. "He isn't the kind to forget anything."

Both Pete and Doris were destined shortly to be very much surprised at the unconscious truth of his excuse.

Pete pulled the small door of the luggage compartment open, and crouching, crawled into the opening which led into the cramped quarters of the airplane's tail.

A moment later Doris thought she heard voices coming from the tail.

"My ears must be deceiving me. It's the noise of the motors," she thought.

She listened more sharply, however, and was convinced that Pete was shouting behind the closed little door.

"He must be in trouble," Doris said to herself, her heart skipping a beat. She arose and reached for the knob of the door.

Before she could open it, the door was kicked ajar from within and Pete's feet appeared in the opening. He crawled out backwards, slowly and with many halts, as if he were hurt.

At last he emerged, all but one arm, and when he yanked that back Doris gasped in amazement. Pete's hand gripped the tangled black locks of a sullen-faced youth who was kicking and struggling.

"A stowaway!" Pete yelled. "Can you beat that? No wonder this ship handled as if it were waterlogged. Who are you?"

He jerked the stowaway upright, and waved a clenched fist under the youth's nose.

"You don't dare touch me!" the black-eyed young man shouted. "You don't know who I am!"

"Don't dare? Say, do you know what we do with hitch-hikers? We tie a parachute to 'em and toss 'em overboard!" Pete raged.

The youth did not even look frightened, but jeered at his captor, knocking Pete's hand aside and tossing the hair out of his eyes. "If I go overboard, you go with me!"

Temper flared in Pete's eyes like a flame, and

he drew back his fist to strike the impudent stowaway. He was not able to do this, however, for just then the plane lurched and all its passengers had to catch their balance.

At the unexpected lurching, Pete's face betrayed a look of great anxiety.

"Oh!" exclaimed Doris. "You'd better go back to your seat. Everything will be all right here."

"I'll go take a look," said Pete hastily, "if you're sure you can manage all right."

"I'll call you if he gets troublesome," called Doris after him.

Directly after Pete had departed the stowaway, his fists clenched, made a step toward Doris. Instantly Wags, who had taken a brave stand at his mistress's side barked violently, dashed toward the fellow, plunged his teeth into one of his legs, and the intruder was forced back.

"Good old Wags," said Doris in relief, "you're a better protection than a pistol ever would be!"

CHAPTER VII

AN UNSCHEDULED LANDING

THERE were now gaps in the clouds below. Pete, again piloting the airplane, pushed its nose down into one of the ragged holes in the vapory sea.

Dave left the compartment and came to stand beside Doris, silently contemplating the sullen captive.

Turning to the stowaway, he saw his torn trouser leg. Doris explained how Wags had come to her assistance when she was on guard. Then, stooping to the dog, Dave patted him on the head and said:

"Good old Wags, you did your part handsomely," at which words the little dog wagged its tail so hard and fast it seemed as if it would fall off.

Doris resumed her seat and watched from the window at the uprushing ground. Frequently great blobs of gray vapor swirled against the window as a fragment of cloud swept by.

The airplane was cutting across rolling ranges of hills, between which broad valleys were checkered with farms. Pete swung his craft into one of the valleys and his passengers could now distinguish

the ducks and chickens that fled before the shadow of this gigantic hawk-like plane.

A great hay-field, with four or five large stacks standing for winter fodder in the middle, seemed Pete's choice for a landing spot.

The roar of the motors halted. The ground rushed up nearer and nearer. Pete nosed his craft up a little, and the great metal bird touched the ground, bumped along for a few hundred feet, and came to a halt.

"I'm still deaf," Doris exclaimed. "My ears are ringing."

Dave flashed her a smile, and as Pete strode up and grasped the stowaway by the collar the young co-pilot unfastened the door in the side of the plane and leaped to the ground.

Pete pushed his struggling captive into Dave's muscular arms and jumped out himself.

"Now, young fellow, give an account of yourself," he ordered.

Doris dropped from the plane to the drenched grass.

"He may be one of the thieves," she whispered to Dave.

He nodded.

"Let me talk to him, Pete," he suggested.

Turning the sullen youth to face him, Dave demanded his name.

"I won't tell you," the boy said.

"What did you mean by stowing away? You might have caused the death of all of us!"

Suddenly the demeanor of the captive changed.

"Please, Mister, I really didn't mean any harm," he whined. "I've been trying to get out West to see my mother, but I didn't have any money. So I hid in the plane when nobody was looking."

"That's a likely story," Dave said. "Where is your mother?"

"She lives in Santa Fe, New Mexico," sniveled the youth, wiping his eyes on his sleeve.

Doris was not moved in the least by the stowaway's apparent humbleness. She concluded that he was at least as old as Marshmallow, and she could not possibly imagine that youth cowering and weeping to get out of a scrape.

"My poor old mother," continued the stowaway. "She is terribly sick, and I wanted to see her before she—she—"

He gulped back a sob.

"Blarney!" snarled Pete, making as if to kick the cowering wretch. "I've heard that kind of story before. Now tell the truth!"

"Honest, Mister, I'm telling the truth," howled the youth.

"Did you know where this ship was bound for?" Dave asked.

"Ra—Hollywood, I mean," stammered the captive. "You are all movie actors, aren't you? The

girls sure look beautiful enough. I think I saw you in the movies lots of times," he added, pointing to Doris.

"He can't tell the truth," said the disgusted Pete. "Come on, let's go. We're losing time."

"Aw, please listen," whined the stowaway. "My name is Lone Eagle De Belle. My mother is an Indian princess and my father was a famous opera singer."

"Ever hear of an opera singer named De Belle?" Dave asked Doris.

Doris shook her head.

"The name does seem familiar—but I'm thinking of Lolita Bedelle, of course!" she exclaimed.

The sallow youth flinched.

"Do you know Miss Bedelle?" Doris demanded.

"What movie was she in?" was the rejoinder.

"Come on," Pete insisted. "All aboard!"

The two men assisted Doris into the plane. Then Pete leaped in and Dave followed.

"Hey!" wailed the stowaway. "You won't leave me here?"

"That's just exactly where we are leaving you," Dave retorted.

"I'll get even with you for this!" howled the youth, stamping his feet in fury.

"Don't try to jump on this plane, either," warned Dave. "Keep off, do you understand?"

"You're going to be sorry!" raved the boy.

The roar of the motors as Pete applied the starter drowned out further threats. Dave slammed the door, bolted it, and strode toward his seat, his jaw squared.

Doris, looking out of the window, suddenly saw the stowaway reach down and pick up something from the ground. He drew back his arm and sent a rock flying toward the nearest whirling propeller.

Fortunately, the plane lurched forward at just the right moment and the stone bounced harmlessly from the metal shield that protected the motor.

Abruptly Pete cut the engines, applied the brakes and flung himself from his seat.

"I'll teach that cub a lesson!" he yelled as he leaped from the plane. But the culprit was already dashing away with a hundred yard lead. The fuming pilot resumed his seat and the great plane took the air.

"I'm afraid that we haven't seen the last of 'Lone Eagle,' " Doris mused.

CHAPTER VIII

RAVEN ROCK

CHAPTER VIII

RAVEN ROCK

THE sun seemed to be the bull's eye at which the great plane was aimed. Doris wondered how the pilots could stand the glare.

"I wonder where we are," she said to herself. "No more hills down below, and it's getting pretty late. I guess I'm like Huckleberry Finn who thought each state was actually a different color, like the maps in the geography books—"

Doris looked up and saw that Dave was signaling to her.

She went forward and took the slip of paper that he offered.

"We are coming to Indianapolis," she read. "We think it safest not to stop at the big airports in case the thieves are looking for us. We will go on a little way."

Doris nodded her approval and returned to her seat, to watch eagerly for Indianapolis. They had passed over many big cities, but to the passengers they had been nameless.

To Doris's mild disappointment Indianapolis was not crossed. The plane veered to the left of the city when it was but a smudge of smoke in the

distance, and roared on high above the sun-parched Indiana prairie.

Smaller towns flitted past beneath them. Looking back, Doris could see the shadow of the airplane pursuing them over the fields.

Then, suddenly, the tune of the motors changed. Built up streets appeared beneath, and another good-sized city was spread out like a map to the air travelers' view. Railroad tracks and roadways converged.

The plane lost altitude. Doris saw a river snaking along, and recognized the wind-vane and bare earth of an airport. A small blue plane was taking off in a cloud of reddish dust.

Pete circled the field, waggled his wings in signal, and brought his craft down to an almost jarless halt. He taxied across to the biggest hangar, the motors snorted once, and were still.

"Terre Haute! All out!" shouted Dave.

A uniformed field official, with the words "Dresser Field" embroidered on his cap, awaited the travelers as they stepped from the plane.

After formal greetings were exchanged Pete went off with the official to arrange for shelter for the plane, while the others rubbed their ears to drive away the singing echoes of the motors.

"Taxi? Anywhere in the city for a dollar," they were solicited by half a dozen men.

Mrs. Mallow signaled to the best dressed of the

taxi drivers, and Dave passed out the luggage to Marshmallow who in turn handed it over to the hackman.

"How do you feel now, Mrs. Mallow?" Doris asked.

"Thankful to have solid earth under my feet again," that lady replied. "But I must admit that flying is not as terrible as I thought it would be. In fact, I might grow to like it."

The young folks received this admission with a cheer.

After the plane had been wheeled into a hangar by attendants Pete rejoined the group.

"We'll need another cab," he decided. "Take us to the best hotel in town," he ordered the man, who leaped forward at his signal.

"You folks from the East?" the taximan asked of Doris, as she and Kitty climbed into the cab of Mrs. Mallow's choice. "Leave New York this morning? It sure is wonderful, this flying. How do you like our airport? It was named after Paul Dresser who wrote 'On the Banks of the Wabash.' You've heard it, haven't you? This is South 7th street we're on now—" and without waiting for answers to his numerous questions, he rattled on until the cab drew to a halt in front of a large brick hotel in the heart of the city.

"My expenses are paid for in advance by the owner of the plane," Pete explained. "So I'll bunk

by myself and you two boys can take a double room if you like."

"That sounds sensible," Dave said. "All right with you, Marshmallow?"

The clerk behind the marble desk stared at the stout youth who answered to so strange a name.

"Sure thing," Marshmallow agreed. "What time is dinner?"

"From six to nine," the clerk answered.

"Half an hour to wait," said Marshmallow mournfully.

"That gives you time to bathe and change your clothes," his mother said.

"I could have had dinner sent up while I was bathing," Marshmallow grinned. "I'm only fooling. Here, let me sign the register."

The party was escorted to its rooms on the fifth floor. Their quarters were all in a row on the corridor. Kitty and Doris shared a room that communicated with Mrs. Mallow's through a joint bath.

Refreshed by shower baths and slightly more formal attire than the traveling costumes they had worn in the plane, the girls joined their three companions in the lobby and amused themselves by watching the traffic and pedestrians until Mrs. Mallow came down. They all entered the dining room for dinner, and enjoyed the repast fully.

"And now, what do you say to a movie?"

Marshmallow suggested. "With ice cream sodas after?"

Doris, Kitty and Dave, of course, voted for the suggestion. Pete and Mrs. Mallow preferred sleep.

"I'm going to read a while and then turn in," the aviator said. "An early start tomorrow?"

"Any time you say," chorused the four.

"Breakfast at seven, then, and in the air before eight-thirty."

Mrs. Mallow had no objections, and so the party divided according to its choices. Doris and her companions spent a couple of hours watching the antics of a motion picture actor who played the part of a heroic air mail pilot, and obtained more enjoyment from Dave's whispered criticism than from the picture.

After the show Marshmallow discovered something new to him, a shop specializing in hot tamales and Mexican tortillas, but the three others contented themselves with sodas.

"You ought to try these," Marshmallow coaxed, tears trickling down his cheeks from the effects of the hot chile peppers. "There are lots of Mexicans where we are going, and you ought to get the proper atmosphere."

"I can't dream of eating anything that would make me feel as bad as that seems to make you feel," Doris replied.

Marshmallow dashed the tears from his eyes and took another bite of tortilla spread with chile con carne.

"He reminds me of the Walrus in 'Alice in Wonderland,' " Dave laughed. "Don't you remember? He cried because he had to eat the oysters, but relished them just the same."

The quartet sauntered back to the hotel and separated with cheery good-nights.

At a few minutes before seven o'clock the next morning the entire party was assembled in the dining room, vacant at that early hour except for a few traveling salesmen.

Breakfast finished and baggage assembled, with Wags brought up from the basement kennels, bills paid and bellboys tipped, the travelers were in taxicabs headed for the airport before eight o'clock had struck.

Pete had telephoned ahead to the flying field, and the airplane was already standing in the runway with a full load of gasoline, while a pair of mechanics tested every part for loose bolts or other weaknesses.

"All's one hundred per cent, Captain," the manager of the airport reported, as Pete led the group to the airplane.

The pilot started the motors, which responded to perfection. The propellers blew a gale, almost knocking the substantial Marshmallow off his feet

as he stood in the line of the backwash stowing the baggage aboard.

Mrs. Mallow needed no urging to enter the ship this time. She took her seat like a veteran air tourist, and the others went to the chairs they had occupied the previous day.

Louder roared the motors, and Pete taxied the plane across the broad field to head into the wind. Swaying and bumping over the ground the great ship rushed forward, and then soared into the morning air so smoothly that, as Marshmallow expressed it, you could eat soup from a knife without spilling a drop.

"My, what flat country," Mrs. Mallow observed, as they were winging their way over the famous corn belt on the great prairies.

Doris had purchased an armload of magazines at the hotel stand, and Marshmallow, of course, had seen to it that substantial lunches had been packed into the hamper.

Between reading and watching the checkerboard of farms passing beneath, the morning went by swiftly.

Once Dave turned and gesticulated to the passengers, pointing downward.

"The Mississippi!" Doris exclaimed, catching sight of the broad, silver-edged yellow stream, impressive even at an altitude of three thousand feet.

Lunch was eaten somewhere over Missouri, and

some time later attention was diverted from a majestic thunder storm marching across country far to the north, to view the purple mass of the famous Ozark Mountains in Arkansas, to the south.

"And look! Oil wells!" shouted Doris. "We are getting near the end of our trip!"

The skeleton steeples of the oil well "riggings" pointed up at the flyers in clusters all over the landscape.

A great smoky city came into view.

"That must be Tulsa," Marshmallow called out, consulting his maps. "We're over Oklahoma now!"

An hour later Oklahoma City was reached, and at the municipal airport Pete brought the aircraft down.

"Don't stray away, folks," he said. "I'm just refueling, and then we'll go on."

"That will just give me time to get an ice cream cone," Marshmallow said. "Will you all have one? Name your flavors."

The air tourists stretched their legs in a brief walk. It was very hot and the air was dry as the breath of a furnace.

"It's not quite five o'clock," Pete said. "We have just about three hundred miles to go, so we'll land in daylight. Let's go!"

"Here comes Marshmallow," Kitty exclaimed. "With—bottles of pop! Goody! I'm thirsty."

"Marshmallow, you are a life saver," they all hailed the perspiring youth as he panted up, a veritable human refreshment stand.

"We'll have our 'tea' in the air," Mrs. Mallow said. "I hope the man doesn't want the bottles back."

"I gave him two cents deposit on each one, so it's all right," Marshmallow said. "He's out six bottles and I'm out twelve cents."

Knowing that they were near their destination the travelers abandoned magazines to scan the territory below. The bright red clay soil of Oklahoma made a startling background for the vivid green of the irrigated fields. Odd-shaped hills dotted the landscape, and there was great excitement when an Indian village of real tepees was crossed.

"Although it's probably a Wild West show from New York giving a performance," Marshmallow said cynically.

Dave was flying the ship now, while Pete pored over charts.

The sun was a huge disc of crimson on the saw-edged horizon when the great airplane pointed its nose downward, its new home reached at last.

A sprawling white house in a grove of cottonwoods, and an artificial lake with a host of white, red-roofed outbuildings was spread out below like a toy farm. A conspicuous new structure, with

"G Clef Rancho" painted on the roof, was obviously the hangar.

A herd of several hundred red, white-headed cattle stampeded as the airplane roared down over their pasture, but the people hurrying from every building on the place let them go their way.

"Oh, the foolish people!" Doris exclaimed. "Someone will be hurt! Why don't they keep off the landing field!"

Pete leveled off about twenty feet above the ground and roared over the assembled ranchers, but instead of scattering to the edges of the field the men and women and children stationed themselves all over the place, cheering with delight.

Again and again Pete Speary had to repeat his maneuver until he was practically dragging his wheels over the sombreros the men wore, before someone had the good sense to order the people back.

At last the wheels of the ship touched ground. The great metal bird coasted to a halt opposite the private hangar, and with a final roar the motors were stilled.

"And now our real adventure begins," Doris cried. "All out for Raven Rock!"

CHAPTER IX

AT CRAZY BEAR RANCH

CHAPTER IX

AT CRAZY BEAR RANCH

"WHERE is Madame Bedelle?" Pete inquired of the first person to reach the air tourists as they stepped out of the plane.

"Ah, Senor! How sad Senora Bedelle not see you arrive!" exclaimed the swarthy majordomo, removing his amazingly huge sombrero with a flourish. "She not expect you before mana—tomorrow—she is far on upper range inspecting new bunk house. Tonight she arrive back."

With white teeth flashing against his dark skin the ranch foreman bowed again and stood very erect, awaiting orders.

"We had better find a place for us to stay," Mrs. Mallow said.

"Is there any ranch around here that accommodates travelers?" Doris asked. "Or is there a hotel at the town, wherever that is?"

"Ah, Senora, no good hotel for high born people at Raven Rock," mourned the foreman, his face as expressive of sorrow as if he were reporting that Raven Rock had just been wiped out by a tornado. "But at Crazy Bear, ah! Nice place, good food! Big rancho!"

"Good food?" Marshmallow pricked up his ears. "But did he say at the crazy house?"

"No, no, Senor! Crazy Bear Rancho. Dat her name. Plenty people from East—Kansas City, Little Rock, Dallas—comes to stay in Spring when she is not such hot weazzer," the sombreroed one explained.

"We might look into it," Mrs. Mallow said. "And where is this ranch?"

"Oh, ver-ry close by, Senora! 'Bout fifteen mile west. Next door dey live."

"Whew! Fifteen miles to the next-door neighbor," Kitty exclaimed. "Imagine running next door to borrow a cup of sugar!"

"How in the world will we get there?" Mrs. Mallow asked.

"Oh, easy!" laughed the foreman. "I ask Ben, he drive you."

"Is Ben the local taxi man?" Dave asked.

"Tax-ee? No sabby tax-ee," shrugged the ranchero. "Ben, he boss Senora Bedelle's tractor-rs. He tiene—he got car. Very good car. He take you to Crazy Bear in fi' minute."

"Say, that's going some!" Marshmallow gasped. "Fifteen miles in five minutes in a car? Whew!"

"I call Ben," bowed the foreman, sweeping the ground with his sombrero.

Pete, who had been inspecting his motors, rejoined the group.

"I've secured quarters here," he explained. "If Miss Bedelle were here I'm sure she'd put you up, too."

"We are under sufficient obligations to Miss Bedelle," Mrs. Mallow smiled. "Thank you for being so considerate, but I think we shall find accommodations. When shall we see you again?"

"Oh, I'm going to stick around a long time," the aviator grinned. "I've a contract to teach Miss Bedelle to fly, and that will take a month and a couple of planes, if she is as temperamental as opera singers are supposed to be."

The tall, swarthy ranch-man appeared, shouldering his way through the crowd of open-mouthed natives, with a muscular, grease-stained, stocky figure in tow.

"If you will give me ze privilege," the foreman bowed, "I weesh introduce Ben Corlies, very nice gentleman, who drive all machinery here."

"Pleased to meet you," growled Ben. "But if Miss Bedelle thinks I'm going to take care of that there cloud-scatterin' contraption for her she is dead wrong."

"Of course—I—we don't know anything about that at all," Mrs. Mallow said, taken aback at the unexpected remark. "This gentleman here said you would drive us over to the next ranch where we might find accommodations."

"Why, you bet your boots!" exclaimed Ben.

"Nothin' would please me better, if only to show you that there ain't no sense to flyin' when you can travel safe on the ground."

"We should be very grateful," Mrs. Mallow said. "And whatever the usual charge is—"

"Charge nothin'," Ben snorted. "Us folks out here don't go pin a price on every little lift we give strangers. Do you want to start right now? I'll be with you in a minute."

He turned and loped around the corner.

"See, Senora?" the swarthy ranchero smiled. "Ben he fix everyt'ing queek! Nice mans, Ben Corlies."

"Thank you for bringing him to our aid," Doris said. "Here he comes back already—Marshmallow, there's a car that ought to make you green with envy."

Ben Corlies was driving up in a touring car, if not as old as Marshmallow's revered antique, then ten times as experienced. The paint had long since been destroyed by desert heat and alkaline sands. The tires were of solid rubber, the top was dismantled and the windshield cracked. Relic as it was, the car had once been of very expensive make, and the motor, although loud, seemed hitting on all twelve cylinders.

"Pile in, folks. Room for everybody," Ben sang out. "I've carried twelve folks in here two hundred miles in one afternoon."

Pete helped stow the baggage in, and with some squeezing the five ex-aeronauts found places in the car also, with Wags electing Doris's lap.

"You folks expect to be out here long?" Ben asked as he shot forward, scattering natives right and left as Pete had been unable to do with his plane.

"Oh, for quite a while," Doris answered.

"Well, Raven Rock is sure looking up," Ben commented. "Town ain't got but fifty people in it if it is the county seat—'though the township countin' all the ranches must have nigh five hundred countin' Mexicans and Indians. Usually it's too hot here exceptin' for us natives, in the summer. But lately quite a few strangers is been scoutin' round. You int'rested in oil?"

"Crude, or cod liver?" Marshmallow responded.

"Not that it makes any difference," Doris added hastily. "We are out here for a vacation."

"I can think of lots better places to go," Ben snorted. "Ain't nothin' to do here but kill rattlers an' watch mirages."

"Is that your job on the ranch?" Doris asked.

"Me? Ha!" Ben laughed. "No, I run all Miss Bedelle's machinery. Her electric light plant, and her tractors, and her cars when she needs a shawfer. That big chap you was talkin' to is the cow boss. He's a Mexican—but that means three-quarter Indian. Nice feller when he ain't mad."

"Miss Bedelle must have a big ranch," Doris suggested.

"Well, there's some bigger but none better," Ben boasted. "She makes it pay, too. Raises cotton, alfalfa, pure-bred Hereford cattle and good horseflesh, too. Danny Sumpter, he's the boss horse-wrangler. You want to meet him. Old Indian fighter."

At this juncture conversation lagged, for the passengers had all they could do to hang on as the car roared over what might be a road but resembled more the dried bed of a stream.

It was fantastic country. Hills with sides as sheer as castle walls, built in layers of red, black, white and yellow rock rose in the landscape. Wind and sand-storms had carved them into shapes suggestive of animals, giants and mythological figures.

On the level grew flat-leaved prickly pear cactus and saw-leaved soap-weed or yucca, mesquite and unrecognized shrubs, and a coarse, rank grass. Herds of white-faced cattle dotted the landscape, and huge-eared jack-rabbits sat up without fear to watch the car go by.

"The real Wild West, all right," Marshmallow said, risking a bitten tongue. "N-never saw anything so gay. Those mountains look like Neapolitan ice cream!"

"I—I almost wish I was back in the airplane,"

Mrs. Mallow confided to Kitty. "I never saw such a road, and such speed!"

Ben, however, steered with one hand, using the other to point out features in the landscape.

"We call that little mesa over there George Washington Hill," he said. "If you look on the north side, there, you'll see a sort of outline of his face. And that there is Dead Man Canyon, on account of the skeleton, a giant big one, they found—"

And so on.

At last, topping a rise, the travelers saw another grove of cottonwoods ahead, a sign of water and human habitation.

A few minutes later a curl of smoke could be distinguished mounting into the darkening sky, and then lights flashed in the shadows.

"That's Crazy Bear Ranch now," Ben said, clearing his throat and raising his voice in a blood-curdling yell that made everyone wince.

"We signal to each other like that, so if anyone is busy he can stop workin' and come down to the road to talk a bit," he explained.

Sure enough, when the ranch was reached half a dozen men were sitting on the fence.

"Hi, Ben!" they chorused.

"Hi, Bill! Hi, Pedro! An' Lew an' Ike and the rest of you," Ben replied. "Bill, I brung you some boarders."

"Well, now, that was right thoughtful of you, Ben," drawled one of the men, rising and approaching the car. "Git off an' light, folks."

"Cowboy clothes!" Doris whispered. "Look!"

"Bill"—and all the others, for that matter—were seen to be wearing floppy leather chaps, spurred boots and neck-kerchiefs.

"I am Mrs. Mallow," that lady introduced herself. "These are my young friends, Miss Doris Force and Miss Norris."

"I'm shore proud to meet you, ladies," grinned Bill. "My name is Bill Saylor."

"And this is my son Marshall, and our friend Mr. David Chamberlin."

"Boys, howdy!" Saylor smiled, reaching out a horny hand. "Now, just you come with me to the house an' meet the missus. The boys here will tote in your luggage."

Adieus were said to Ben, who seemed insulted when payment for the drive was mentioned, and then all followed Bill Saylor to the house.

It was too dark to distinguish much except a very long one-story building with more doors than windows. Framed in the light that streamed from one of the former was a woman.

"Got company, Ma!" Bill called out.

"You're sure welcome," said Mrs. Saylor, who proved to be a slender woman of rather less than middle age. "And I'll bet you're hungry."

Marshmallow emitted a faint moan.

"I'll take you right to your rooms. I expect you are staying over night? Then we can talk afterwards, but right now you'll want to wash."

Mrs. Saylor led the way through a gleaming kitchen through a back door and into a grassy courtyard. Then the visitors realized the house was built in the form of a hollow square surrounding a grass plot about sixty feet square in which a pool reflected the first star of the evening overhead, and in which a tall poplar rustled in the breeze.

"I'll put you two girls in here," Mrs. Saylor said, opening a door and switching on a shaded light which revealed a whitewashed bedroom. On its walls hung gay Indian blankets, half a dozen of which also covered the broad, low, Spanish-style twin beds of some yellow wood.

"It is lovely," said Doris, complimenting the agreeable hostess.

"And Mrs. Mallow, you'll sleep next door," the ranch-woman continued with a pleasant smile, ushering her into a similarly furnished room.

"You boys will bunk in here together," Mrs. Saylor said, leading Dave and Marshmallow into a room the counterpart of the girls', except that a buffalo hide Indian shield, with bow and fringed quiver of arrows, decorated one wall.

"There's no running water, but plenty in the buckets," Mrs. Saylor said. "We make our own

electricity, but we can't have running water, as we have to get it from wells, and they're fifteen hundred feet deep. Now I'll make you some supper.

"I didn't expect anybody, so you'll just have to take pot luck," she added. "Come into the kitchen when you are ready, and I'll see if I can't scare up some fried chicken and tomato soup, with some squash and yams and corn-pudding. I think I had some left over, and pie and coffee."

After Mrs. Saylor had gone back to the kitchen, Doris and Kitty examined their room more closely.

"Isn't this attractive?" Kitty asked. "The whole country, too."

"Lovely," replied Doris. "So lovely I wish I didn't have to think about any unpleasant things while we're here. But I'm afraid I'll have to get right down to business."

"Well," came the suggestion from the irrepressible Kitty, "there's such a thing as combining business with pleasure."

CHAPTER X

NOTHING BUT TROUBLE

CHAPTER X

NOTHING BUT TROUBLE

"SAY, this is the real thing all right," Marshmallow exclaimed.

"What do you mean?" Dave asked.

"Oh, the primitive frontier life but with most modern conveniences," Marshmallow answered. "Cowboys and Indians, rattlesnakes and cactus, electric lights and swell food! Do you think we could get ourselves some of those leather sailor pants?"

It was the next day after the arrival of Doris and her friends. The two boys were in the courtyard of the Crazy Bear ranch-house, waiting for their three charming companions to appear for breakfast.

Overhead the bluest sky in the world was arched. The whitewashed adobe walls of the house framed green grass, fragrant in the early morning air.

"I'd feel funny dressed up in chaps," Dave admitted. "What I'd rather locate is an auto."

"Say, that's an idea!" Marshmallow exclaimed. "Let's ask Bill Saylor if there is one we can hire around here."

"Let's go find him, but don't let on to the others," Dave suggested.

While the young men were plotting their little surprise, Doris and Kitty were discussing what attire they would don for the first day on the ranch.

"I guess it will have to be our riding habits," Doris said. "We will want to explore a lot, and I have to get into town to see about the deed."

"Horse-back is the way to travel in this part of the world," Kitty added. "That doesn't make me mad at all."

A few minutes later the girls stepped out of their room into the patio, Doris trim in whipcord breeches and top boots, with a green polo shirt worn open at the throat. Kitty wore long trousers faced with chamois, and jodhpur half-boots nattily strapped across the ankle, with a yellow shirt which showed her brown hair and tanned complexion off to best advantage.

"Wonder where Marshmallow and Dave are?" each said aloud. "They were talking here a minute ago. Oh—good morning, Mrs. Mallow."

"Good morning. Are the boys up yet?"

Mrs. Mallow was dressed for comfort, not for action, in a summery cotton print frock.

"I'm worried, girls," she said. "I think unpleasant news is a bad appetizer for breakfast, but I have lost my handbag!"

"Oh, was there money in it?" Doris cried.

"Yes, there was," Mrs. Mallow admitted. "Except for the bank letter of credit, which I kept in my suitcase, there was all the money I took along. Over a hundred dollars, and my rings and other personal things."

"Oh, you surely must have left it in the auto last night," Kitty said soothingly. "We will call Ben Corlies—if there is such a thing as a telephone around."

"I hope so, but I just can't remember having the bag at all," Mrs. Mallow frowned. "The last time I recall having it was way back in Indiana."

Doris looked at her left hand, where the great ruby given to her by the Gates twins flashed fire. She was glad that precious jewel was not mislaid, for its romantic history made it valuable to her far above its not inconsiderable worth in money.

"Hey, slow-pokes!"

The hail came from a doorway opposite the worried little group.

It was Marshmallow, announcing breakfast.

"Go ahead, you two," Doris said. "I'll just search our room to make sure your bag did not get mixed up with our things last night, and then I'll join you."

While the others began breakfast Doris searched through the effects of Kitty and herself, but no handbag was found.

At the breakfast table the lost bag was the main

topic of conversation, with Mrs. Saylor listening sympathetically.

"You can telephone to the G Clef Ranch, all right," the pleasant woman said. "The 'phone is in the sitting room. I'll show you where."

Breakfast over, Doris called up the opera singer's ranch, but learned that no one in authority was at home. Miss Bedelle was already trying out her new airplane, and Ben himself was supervising some tractor work a mile from the house.

"Please explain to Mr. Corlies that we think we left the bag in his car," Doris repeated. "And have him call up Mrs. Mallow at the Crazy Bear Ranch whether he finds it or not."

With that the travelers had to be satisfied.

"If you girls want horses just walk over to the corral and whichever one of the ranch-hands is out there, tell him what kind of mount you want," Mrs. Saylor told Kitty and Doris.

The boys had already started out.

"It's sort of selfish of them to run off without waiting for us," Kitty pouted.

The corral, built of skinned pinon poles, housed a dozen wiry cow ponies varying from coal black to pure white and spotted "pintos," or "paints," as the girls learned the cowboys called them.

"There is no one here," Doris said, looking around. "I wonder where Dave and Marsh could have gone?"

"Here come a couple of cowboys now," Kitty pointed.

Two chap-clad and sombrero-topped figures shambled around the corner of a long, low building, and a third hurried and joined them. The last comer seemed to be in some sort of pain, from the way in which he pressed his hands to his side and staggered as he walked.

"Why—it's— Doris, look! It's Marshmallow and Dave!"

Doris stared at Kitty's command and burst out laughing.

"What's the matter?" Marshmallow demanded, removing the "ten-gallon" hat and running a finger around the belt of the too-snugly-fitting chaps.

"Yes, why the mirth?" Dave asked.

The genuine cowboy, whose agony proved to be that of mirth and not of pain, wiped his eyes.

"They—they—put the chaps on backwards first," he gasped. "Excuse me, ladies, for laughin' at your friends, but it shore is queer to watch dudes puttin' on trappin's for the first time."

"What do you mean, dudes?" demanded Marshmallow, nettled. "Do you think this costume is fancy?"

" 'Scuse me, sir," the cowboy grinned. "Dudes is what we call all tenderfeet. No, them clothes is the real article. Ike and Lew won't miss 'em. Now, you-all want hosses?"

He took down a lasso from a peg on a corral post, and climbed over the bars.

"Better let me pick 'em for you," he said.

"I—I'm not sure I want to ride," Kitty whispered as the horses, ears back, teeth bared and manes flying, dashed around the enclosure.

"They do look vicious," Doris agreed.

The cowboy's wrist jerked and his noose settled around the neck of one white-and-black pony, which instantly stood still. The others bunched in a corner and rolled their eyes.

"Here's a gentle bronch," the cow-hand said, leading the animal to the bars and slipping a halter over its head.

In that manner four horses were caught, and one by one saddled, bridled and led forth.

Kitty chose a buckskin and Doris the "pinto." Dave drew a rangy chestnut mare, and Marshall won a black one, which insisted on waltzing constantly.

"You'll soon tire her out," grinned the horse wrangler, eyeing Marshmallow's substantial form.

"Where shall we go first?" Kitty asked.

"Dave and I are riding off on a little secret mission toward town," Marshmallow said. "So you two go off somewhere by yourselves."

"As if we wanted you tagging around anyhow," sniffed Kitty.

"Perhaps you will guide us around?" Doris

smiled at the cowboy, ignoring the two city boys. "It would be best for us to have an experienced man with us at first."

The cowboy blushed, grinning broadly.

"I'm shore proud to ride with you, ladies," he declared.

Dave stopped in his tracks.

"Maybe—say, you go on ahead to Raven Rock, and I'll go along with the girls and take care of them," Dave announced to Marshmallow.

"Hey, what's the idea?" that young man snorted indignantly. "What will I do with the horse? It's a two-man job, this!"

"Oh, all right," grumbled Dave, shooting a sharp glance at the ecstatic cowboy. "Don't go far, Doris."

"Don't worry about us," Doris replied sweetly. "We'll be in safe company."

She wheeled her pony and cantered across the yard, followed by Kitty, while the cowboy hastily vaulted the corral to the back of a surprised broncho which began vigorously to object to its rider.

"Say, there's a real Wild West show! Bareback bucking!" Marshmallow exclaimed.

"Come on, we must hurry," Dave said curtly, and dug spurs into his mount. The animal took its bit between its teeth and streaked off in a cloud of dust.

"Hi, wait up!" yelled Marshmallow, slapping his pony with the reins and starting in pursuit.

"They'll be killed!" Doris cried. "Oh, why didn't they come with us?"

The flying hoofs of the boys' horses soon carried them out of sight, and the cowboy, who introduced himself as Ben Bostock, rode up on his subdued broncho.

"There's lots to see, ladies," he said. "Let's take it easy, though, and ride out to watch 'em branding some young stock up the line."

Two hours later, when the girls returned to the ranch yard a little stiff from the unaccustomed riding in high Western saddles, Dave and Marshmallow had not yet returned. Mrs. Mallow was chatting with Mrs. Saylor, exchanging professional secrets and recipes, in the shade of the cottonwoods.

"How far off is the town?" Doris asked, as she sank to the ground beside Mrs. Mallow.

"Only about eight miles," Mrs. Saylor replied. "It isn't much of a town. Just the court-house and a theater where we have movies every Saturday night, and a couple of stores and a dozen houses."

"I wonder what the secret mission is that the boys went on," Kitty mused.

As if in reply to her query there came a great honking from the road, while into the yard there

rolled in triumph a light touring car of popular make with Marshmallow at the wheel.

Behind came Dave, trotting along on his chestnut mare and leading Marshmallow's skittish black.

"Look what I have!" shouted Marshmallow.

"Where did you find it?" Kitty sniffed.

"What's the matter with this car?" Marshmallow demanded. "This was the purpose of our secret mission. We rented this for ten days, and what a job it was to find it, too."

"How did you?" Mrs. Saylor asked. "I didn't know there was a car for rent in the town."

"Oh, it belongs to a chap who is in jail," Dave explained cheerily. "We went around to see him and he was glad enough to have it earning a little money. But he gets out in ten days, so he'll want it back then."

"Oh, I forgive you everything," Doris laughed. "And I'll be in your debt in the bargain if you will take me for a ride this minute."

"Sure thing. Where to?" Marshmallow asked.

"Oh, just around," Doris said vaguely. "Come on, let's all go."

The entire group, excepting Mrs. Saylor who could not leave her household duties, climbed into the car and Marshmallow took to the road.

"Drive back to town, Marshmallow," Doris said. "And right to the court-house. We have no time to lose doing the work we came here for."

"All right!" Marshmallow agreed, pushing the accelerator to the floorboard. "Here we go."

Raven Rock was reached in twenty minutes, and could have been thoroughly explored in half that time. The town had but one street, and many of the buildings had false fronts to make them appear twice their height of one story. The court-house was the most imposing structure of all, the only one that was two genuine stories in height, and was surmounted by a mission tower in which hung a bell.

Every building in Raven Rock was of adobe, or sun-baked brick plastered over and whitewashed, or tinted pink, blue and green. The railroad station stood next door, a one-room salmon pink edifice.

Doris left her friends, who were to explore the two shops, while she went about her business in the court-house.

The registrar of deeds proved to be a tall, lanky person in shirt sleeves and blue denim trousers tucked into high-heeled boots. A flowing sandy moustache covered his mouth.

"Yes, Ma'am, and what kin I do fer you?" the official asked, taking his feet from his desk and removing his sombrero in greeting.

Doris looked around for a chair, at which the man jumped up and offered his.

"I'll sit on the desk," he said.

Doris explained that she wished to establish title to three tracts of land, the deeds of which had been stolen.

"They were bought about thirty years ago—not less than twenty-nine, not more than thirty-one," she said. "The owners' names are Azalea and Iris Gates, unmarried, and a Mr. John Trent."

"I'm not expert at this job yet," the official said. "I only been here since last November's election. I'll look up the books."

He opened an old-fashioned safe with a huge key, and removed some ledgers.

"Lucky thing nobody buys much land here, ever," he said. "These two books got the history of every parcel of land in the county. Now, let's see."

He pored over the volumes, while a silence broken only by the buzz of a fly and the crackle of the turning pages settled down upon the room.

At last he turned to Doris.

Her heart sank as he shook his head slowly.

"No, Ma'am," the registrar said. "There ain't no record of any property under them names at all."

CHAPTER XI

UNPLEASANT ENCOUNTERS—AND OTHERS

"WHAT does that mean?" Dave asked, seriously.

"It means that whoever has the deeds in his possession can establish ownership," Doris sighed, as she settled back into the car after leaving the registrar.

"But surely you can warn the county official that whoever tries to register the deeds is acting fraudulently," Mrs. Mallow said.

"We should have to prove it," Doris replied. "I talked all that over with the registrar. He seems to be a sort of political job-holder, not very ambitious or smart. But he did suggest that someone might have bought the deeds in good faith from whomever stole them, in order to complicate matters."

Gloomily the five sat in the parked car, its nose to the hitching rack in front of a store which dealt in saddles, drugs, ammunition and radios.

"Not even an ice cream soda in this burg," Marshmallow groaned. "Warm pop, that's all."

Doris glanced listlessly along the hot, dusty street. Half a dozen ponies were hitched here and there, standing with drooping heads. One

other car, yellow with alkaline dust, stood in front of the structure which advertised itself as the "Raven Rock Ritz—Meals at All Hours."

A man emerged from the restaurant and stood for a moment vigorously manipulating a toothpick.

He climbed into the car and backed violently into the road, describing a wide arc.

"Oh! Look out!" Doris cried.

"Hey, you—you—" Marshmallow shouted in alarm.

Crash!

The rear of the automobile struck Marshmallow's rented car.

Dave leaped out, furious at the stranger's carelessness.

"No harm done," he cried. "The bumpers met, thank goodness. Say, stranger, do you think you're in the middle of the prairie?"

"Whadda you want to park in the middle of the road for?" snarled the stranger, as he shifted gears noisily and tore off up the street.

As Dave watched him go, he clenched his fists, and fumed.

"I'd like to teach him a lesson in driving courtesy, and I will if I ever meet him again."

"Oh, come on, no harm done," said the more easy-going Marshmallow. "You'll never see him again."

Marshmallow was thoroughly mistaken, al-

though none of the party realized it then. Doris's intuition suddenly made her remark:

"That man looked downright vicious. I hope he is not connected with any crooked land deals. He seems to be unscrupulous."

"Let's go back to the ranch," Mrs. Mallow said. "I think this village is depressing. And perhaps Mr. Corlies may have called up about the lost handbag."

Silently and glumly Marshmallow turned the car about and headed it toward the ranch.

"Oh, Marshall, not so fast on this narrow road," his mother cautioned him.

"Look, there's a road that goes off to the left," Doris pointed. "It may be a short cut, and then again it may go some other interesting place. You see, we don't know the country."

"Can't be any worse than the highway," Marshmallow replied, sending the car into the side road with a twist of the wheel.

It was a rough drive, but fascinating. Twisting in and out between the weirdly shaped buttes and mesas, fording dry streams, skirting deep arroyos, the twisting route soon made everyone lose all sense of direction.

"I think we are getting farther away from the ranch," Mrs. Mallow said. "Perhaps you had better turn back, Marshall."

Kitty agreed, too.

"No place to turn," Marshall said. "I'd hate to get mixed up in that cactus and sand. I shouldn't even want to meet another car."

The road twisted out of sight under the face of a gaudy orange cliff, and when the car negotiated the bend everyone sat up straight at the sight of a huge herd of cattle, not only on both sides of the road but on it as well.

"Whew, there must be thousands," Dave whistled.

Marshmallow stopped the car and honked violently to clear the road.

"The big stupids," he cried in dismay. "They are doing just the opposite!"

The cattle, smelling the water in the radiator of the automobile, crowded around the car.

"Ooh, Marshmallow!" Kitty cried. "They scare me! Chase them away.

"Why, Doris," she said, looking at her chum, "you aren't a bit afraid."

Doris merely smiled calmly.

"I'm no bull-fighter," Marshmallow retorted.

A huge white-faced steer laid its chin on the side of the tonneau and stared gloomily at the three feminine autoists in the back seat.

"Shoo!" cried Mrs. Mallow, shaking her finger at the calm-eyed beast.

The curious cattle had now entirely surrounded the car—back, front and sides.

"Beefsteak, beefsteak everywhere but not a bite to eat," chanted Marshmallow.

"Put her in low gear and inch your way along," Doris suggested.

"Or else get out and milk some of the cows," said Dave. "I'm awfully thirsty from the dust."

Marshmallow started the car and moved forward at the lowest speed it was capable of doing. The automobile literally plowed its way through the herd.

"Look at their sides—the brands," Doris shouted to make herself heard above the bellowing. "A clef—Miss Bedelle's brand, I'll bet."

With the inquisitive cattle at last behind them Mrs. Mallow became concerned again at the uncertain terminus of the road.

"It probably goes to Miss Bedelle's ranch," Doris ventured. "From there we can find our way to the Saylor's place without trouble."

Marshmallow drove doggedly ahead, and suddenly halted abruptly.

"Something else coming," he exclaimed. "I hear a noise around the turn."

Scarcely had he finished speaking when an automobile appeared around the bend. Marshmallow hastily backed, swinging his car half off the crude roadway.

The approaching motor, an expensive new sports roadster, slackened speed and crept slowly past.

Its sole occupant and driver looked at the party curiously, waved in courteous greeting, and sped off toward Raven Rock.

"That looked like Miss Bedelle," Doris exclaimed.

"She reminds me of somebody I know," Dave said.

"Me, too," Doris asserted. "I have it! The stowaway—she looks enough like him to be his sister."

"You're right, Doris!" chorused the others.

"I'll bet the stowaway is her brother," Doris said. "That would explain his anxiety to get to Raven Rock, don't you see?"

"But Miss Bedelle is wealthy," Mrs. Mallow objected. "Certainly no relative of hers would have to steal rides."

"He may be the black sheep of the rancho," Dave laughed.

"Yes, he probably is," Doris agreed. "Anyhow, we will soon find out."

Marshmallow pointed to a post set up where the road forked. Nailed to the upright was a board on which was crudely lettered "G Clef Ranch" on the half pointing to the left, and "Crazy Bear Ranch" on the right.

Marshmallow steered right, and in half an hour the cottonwoods came into sight, while a few minutes later the car came to a halt in the ranch yard.

"Maybe you don't realize it," announced the chauffeur, stretching his sturdy legs, "but it's after two o'clock and we haven't had lunch!"

"We have company," Doris said. "There comes Ben Corlies, and I do hope he has the missing bag!"

CHAPTER XII

"BURIED TREASURE"

CHAPTER XII

"BURIED TREASURE"

"No, Ma'am, I didn't find your bag," Ben Corlies announced to Mrs. Mallow. "I feel right bad about it, too, because it puts me in a bad light."

"Not at all," protested Mrs. Mallow. "You must not feel that way. Of course, I am distressed at losing the bag because I cannot afford to lose so much money, but I blame only my own carelessness."

"I guess anybody'd get rattled, ridin' around in one of them flyin' hen-coops," Ben replied, shaking his head. "Miss Bedelle, she went off in one of her cars after lunch, but all mornin' she spent up in the air with that Pete fellow. She's learnin' to run it, he tells me. Well, she can beg until she cries, but she won't get Ben Corlies up in it."

"Bring Pete down with you soon," Dave said, as the friends walked over to his car with Ben.

"He'd of come down with me this trip, but he's busy fiddlin' around the cloud-hopper," Ben replied. "Except for bein' crazy that way he's right nice."

"By the way, has Miss Bedelle a brother?" Doris asked suddenly.

Ben started.

"Yes, but nobody mentions him much," he said, looking over his shoulder. "A young feller, but wild!"

Doris looked at her companions with triumph.

"Fact is, Miss Bedelle took up ranchin' so's her young brother would be away from the cities and bad companions," Ben continued. "But he beat it away from here 'bout a year ago, an' good riddance."

Then, as if realizing he had said more than he had intended, Ben abruptly started his car and sped away.

"The plot thickens!" Doris exclaimed dramatically.

"But our hero thins, if there is such a word," Marshmallow declared. "I'm going to e-a-t, dine!"

Mrs. Saylor was spreading a table in the cool, fragrant dining room.

"I figured you went exploring," she said with a smile, "so I prepared only a cold lunch. There's some sliced meats, potato salad and canned pears, and iced tea," she checked off.

"After lunch," Marshmallow announced, "I'm going to rest. I'm stiff from riding two different kinds of bronchos—four legged and four wheeled."

"I feel just like taking it easy in the shade, too," Kitty added.

"Lazy folks, you two," Doris scoffed. "What do you say, Dave? Let's go for a long ride."

"I'm ready," Dave agreed. "A good stiff gallop over the hills!"

Marshmallow and Kitty groaned, but Dave had caught Doris's meaning wink.

"I'd like to climb up to the top of one of those funny hills, too," Doris said. "Let's ride until we find a big one."

"Just the thing," Dave cried with a great show of enthusiasm. "Marshmallow, you'll just have to come along. It will do you a world of good!"

"Not if we were leaving tonight and I'd never have another chance to see the country," that youth said with conviction. "Me for the shade, a pitcher of something cool and a magazine."

" 'A book of verse, a jug of lemonade; and thou singing beside me in the shade,' " misquoted Doris.

Luncheon over, Marshmallow straightway took himself off to the cottonwood grove, carrying an armful of cushions and numerous magazines.

"I hope you realize I was joking, Dave," Doris said, "because I am going to practice some singing."

"If you hadn't winked, I'd have pretended a sunstroke," Dave laughed. "If I can't practice flying, I'm going to practice napping."

So the lazy afternoon was consumed, although Doris, after an hour of vocal practice, did a great

deal of thinking as she swayed in one of the hammocks beneath the trees.

After all, it was no vacation that she was spending at Raven Rock. Serious work had to be done.

"Perhaps I had better wire Uncle Wardell," she thought. "But the news may leak out in town what we are here for, if I do."

The one interruption in the afternoon occurred when a picturesque figure rode into the yard.

It was that of a man in conventional Western garb astride a sturdy mount, and leading a white mule bearing a loaded pack-saddle.

The man, tall and sun-bronzed, was met by Mrs. Saylor in a manner that showed he was no stranger to the neighborhood. He dismounted, and Bostock, the horse-wrangler, took charge of the animals.

"Looks as if we have another boarder," Dave commented, surveying the arrival from beneath lowered lids.

At the supper table, an hour later, Mrs. Saylor introduced the stranger as a "Mr. Alan Plum, the surveyor."

"You must know all the nooks and corners of this territory," Doris commented to Plum.

"I could find my way through the country blindfold," Plum smiled. "It's mighty interesting country, though, and I don't tire of it."

"What's to it but sand and cactus and cows and

crooked hills?" Marshmallow asked, listening to the conversation.

"That is all, if you look at it one way," Plum answered. "On the other hand, it is beautiful and fascinating. I could show you the ruins of some cliff dwellings that were ancient before Columbus was born, or fossil footprints of a dinosaur that must have been fifty feet long."

"Near here?" Kitty asked.

"An hour's ride will take you to either," the surveyor said. "Would you like to see them?"

Even Marshmallow expressed great desire to see the relics of by-gone ages.

"Well, I'll be busy tomorrow checking over the bench-marks on some land near here," Plum said. "There are three sections of land between here and the village that some Easterners are interested in, if they can get title to them."

Doris almost choked on a slice of bread.

"What—why should they be interested?" she managed to ask, trying to make her query appear casual.

Plum shrugged his shoulders.

"I'm only an amateur geologist," he said, "but I suspect there may be oil in these parts."

A great light dawned on Doris.

No wonder the deeds for the Raven Rock property were worth committing assault and battery and theft for!

"May we ride with you?" she asked. "We'd love to explore the country with someone who knows about it. We won't be in your way."

"Delighted to have company," Plum responded heartily. "Are you early risers?"

"Up with the larks," Marshmallow said.

"Then it's a party," Plum smiled. "But be prepared for a stiff ride. Each section is six hundred and forty acres, a square mile, and I have to locate the boundary lines on all three."

No one had any trouble going to sleep that night, and in expectation of the cross-country ride they had no trouble in rising early the next morning.

Mrs. Mallow, whose suspicion of horses was even greater than that of airplanes, decided to remain at the ranch.

Eight o'clock found the four young friends mounted and ready. Plum took the lead and they trotted off over the road which they had covered in the automobile the preceding afternoon, Wags loping along behind.

"Title to this property isn't very clear," Plum explained as they jogged along. "It isn't public land, because it was all bought up twenty-five or thirty years ago when the government put it on sale. But some folks never developed their property, and these three sections aren't even recorded."

Doris thought hard.

Everything that Plum said fitted in with her mission.

"This property," she told herself, "is certainly Uncle John's and the Gates sisters'. And—the crooks have the deeds!"

Plum chatted about geological formations, tossing off remarks about millions of years as if he had lived them all.

The four young people liked the surveyor more every minute. He was cultured, with an easy humor and a rich baritone laugh, and physically truly handsome.

He told them a little about himself.

"I was a civil engineer once," he said. "But two years in the Paraguay jungles affected my lungs and I came here for my health. That was fifteen years ago. The climate cured me in two, but I fell in love with the country and stayed.

"It is romantic and—whoops! Hold tight!"

Doris's horse had suddenly risen on its hind legs, snorting and pawing the air. Then it wheeled and would have bolted had not the girl held it in check.

Dave leaped from his horse, which had begun to lunge and kick, to hasten to Doris's aid.

"Get on that horse!" thundered Plum, a stern note of command in his voice.

All of the horses were backing and filing, their nostrils quivering, and Wags was sprinting back toward the ranch.

"Listen!" Plum said, lifting one hand.

To all ears came a buzzing, menacing sound.

"Wasps!" Marshmallow cried, looking all around him.

"No, look there," Plum directed, pointing at the ground.

Doris's skin pricked with loathing as she followed the surveyor's outstretched finger and saw two ugly, brown-blotched coils on the trail, from which rose two swaying heads with gaping mouths.

"Rattlesnakes!" Doris exclaimed.

"And big ones," Plum said, pulling out a revolver.

His weapon cracked twice, and the venomous heads seemed to dissolve into thin air.

The writhing coils twisted and stretched beneath the horrified gaze of the four "tenderfeet."

As the convulsive motions of the dying reptiles grew less, Plum leaped from his horse and picked up the bodies by the tails.

"Six-footers," he exclaimed. "Do you want the rattles for souvenirs?"

He twisted the links from the tails of the snakes and gave one each to Dave and Marshmallow.

"The first and foremost rule in this country is, 'Watch your step!'" Plum advised. "That goes all ways, literally and figuratively."

Wags, suddenly reappearing, barked his approval.

The first bench-mark was located, and Plum took a long sight and headed for the place where the next one should be.

"I hate to see the oil wells come in here," he said. "The ugly old derricks, the grease-fouled air and the get-rich-quick, fly-by-night sort of civilization that springs up.

"But I hear in town that an Eastern syndicate is trying to buy up all the available land here. So far no one living in these parts has sold. They don't trust the company's representative at all."

Plum kept his eyes straight ahead as he talked, so as not to miss his direction.

Doris, sweeping the country as far as her eyes could reach, suddenly drew rein.

"There's a man on horseback up there!" she exclaimed, pointing to one of the flat-topped mesas.

"Where?" Plum asked, halting his horse.

"He—why, he's gone!" Doris cried, shading her eyes.

CHAPTER XIII

A NEW FRIEND

"ARE you sure it was a man and not a stray steer?" Plum asked.

"No, it was a man," Doris said with conviction.

"Probably a cowboy rounding up strays," Plum commented. "But it's funny he should duck out of sight as if he didn't want to be seen."

The horses were spurred forward again.

"Tell us some more about the Easterners," Doris suggested, riding up beside Plum. "I should think the people around here would be glad to have oil struck on their land. They would all be rich."

"Most folks around here are far from poor," Plum laughed. "The country may not look like much to you but it is some of the best stock-range in the West, and where it is irrigated it is very fertile.

"No, the old-timers around here are content. It is the people who haven't their roots in the ground, the idlers and the politicians, who are helping the syndicate to locate here for their own selfish ends."

Doris wondered if she should confide in Plum, but decided to be discreet.

"We rode over some of this country yesterday in

a car," she said. "We saw a lot of cattle with Miss Bedelle's brand on and thought the property was hers."

"It isn't," Plum said. "No one rightly knows who owns it, for there are no records to show at the court-house. By rights the property should have been sold for unpaid taxes long ago."

Doris wondered if, after all, she was on the right track, for she distinctly remembered that canceled tax bills had been among the papers stolen from her Uncle Wardell.

Probably this was not the land belonging to Uncle John and the Misses Gates at all.

"Is there much unclaimed land like this around?" she asked.

"N-no," frowned Plum. "There is one half-section over at the other end of the county, and two or three scattered quarter sections."

Doris was more puzzled than ever.

"We had an unpleasant meeting with a man in town," she said, changing the subject. "Everyone has been so kind and considerate, but this chap ran into our car while we were parked in front of a store, and instead of apologizing he was very abusive."

She described the man who had figured in the unpleasant encounter.

Plum whistled.

"That's the oil man," he said. "And inci-

dentally, my employer for the moment. Henry Moon is his name. He's usually pretty smooth and slick."

So, all unknowing, they had already had a brush with the enemy, Doris thought to herself.

"Well," she mused, "we know who Henry Moon is but he doesn't know who we are. That's an advantage for our side."

At noon the job was half completed, and Plum pitched camp for the party on the shady side of a big butte. From the patient pack-mule he unloaded a bountiful lunch prepared by Mrs. Saylor, and while they ate the members of the party chatted.

"These hills are all 'miocene' formation," Plum explained. "They are full of fossils of camels and giant ground sloths, horses with toes and other weird creatures. I've guided geological expeditions many times."

"Camels! In America?" Kitty marveled.

"Yes, and elephants, too," Plum said. "In early formations, laid bare where the waters have cut deep in the gullies, one sometimes finds remains of dinosaurs, real dragons."

"I'm glad I'm in the present," Marshmallow said, lovingly contemplating a chicken sandwich. "Suppose a scaly dinosaur poked his head over the top of the hill and took a bite out of this."

"He'd find you a more luscious morsel than the

sandwich," scoffed Doris. "Look, there goes Miss Bedelle's airplane!"

All looked aloft at the great metal bird which, flashing in the sun like molten silver, came roaring into view.

"Geewhillikers," mourned Dave. "My hands itch to grab a joy-stick again!"

All waited for some signal from the plane, to signify that Pete had seen his erstwhile companions below, but none came.

"Well, that's—hey!"

"Why Marshmallow, what's the matter?" Kitty exclaimed.

"Matter! Matter enough," howled the youth. "Our lunch is gone!"

Sure enough, the hamper had vanished from under their very noses.

Plum got to his feet.

"Such things don't happen," he said.

"Well, cut yourself a piece of cake, then," Marshmallow retorted. "Help yourself to a banana."

"Probably you conjured up the ghost of a dinosaur with your talk, and he ate the lunch," Dave said solemnly.

"This is no joke," Doris said, looking about her wildly.

"Yes, it is," Dave laughed, reaching behind a big boulder and producing the missing hamper.

"You were all so busy looking at the plane I couldn't resist throwing a scare into Marshmallow. A meal without dessert to him would be like pie without a crust or filling."

"I'll get even with you," Marshmallow growled, looking into the hamper to see that nothing was unduly missing.

He was not one to bear a grudge, however, and Marshmallow's indignation was drowned in the contents of a vacuum bottle of cold lemonade.

It was a tired but, at least for Doris, a wiser party that trooped into the ranch yard that evening. Dusty, saddle-sore and hungry, they taxed the water capacity of the Crazy Bear's reservoir by demands for baths.

"I'd be happy if only I could find my purse," Mrs. Mallow said after supper. "There is no bank in Raven Rock and I will have a tiresome journey to get my letter of credit honored."

Plum was most solicitous over Mrs. Mallow's loss. He questioned her closely about the missing purse, and was eloquent in trying to comfort her.

"It will turn up all right," he said. "The trouble is you have too much time to worry about your loss. Tomorrow you must ride out with me. I want to show you those Indian ruins."

He escorted Mrs. Mallow to the hammocks under the cottonwoods, discoursing spiritedly on the charms and wonders of the great Southwest.

Doris watched the middle-aged couple move off in laughing conversation.

"Plum seems to find Mrs. Mallow very interesting company," she said, turning to Dave with a smile.

"I don't blame him," Dave grinned. "If I were only twenty-five years older I'd jump at the chance of acquiring such a charming son as Marshmallow, here."

"Oh, go stick your head in the watering trough," Marshmallow said.

"Wouldn't it be lovely if we found ourselves in the middle of a romance," Kitty laughed, joining in the fun. "I wonder if Mr. and Mrs. Plum would take up ranching. Would you invite us to your round-ups, Marshmallow?"

"I'll lasso that foolish surveyor and brand him," Marshmallow threatened. "What does he mean, forcing himself on my mother like that?"

Dave sensed that Marshmallow was not enjoying the conversation, and changed the subject.

"There is going to be a grand moon," he said. "Let us walk up to that little hill just over there, and Doris—will you sing for us?"

"I'd love to," Doris said, simply and sincerely. "I've been yearning to sing just as you have been yearning to fly, Dave."

The four chums sauntered slowly toward the round butte that rose a hundred yards or so from

the house. Doris walked silently, her mind busy with the facts she had learned that day, facts which convinced her that unscrupulous, greedy men were her opponents in the contest for the property. She debated with herself the advisability of summoning aid from one or another of her uncles.

Yet, a few minutes later, it was a sweet, untroubled voice that rose through the moon-silvered air in the lovely old tune of "Sweet Alice Ben Bolt."

CHAPTER XIV

THE CLOUDS GATHER

CHAPTER XIV

THE CLOUDS GATHER

"I AM going to drive over to the ruined cliff dwellings with Mr. Plum this morning," Mrs. Mallow announced at the breakfast table next morning.

"Won't you all come along?" she added. "It will be very interesting."

Marshmallow looked distinctly annoyed.

"Dave and I heard the men at the corral talking about a bull-dogging contest near here today," he said. "We thought we might all go over and see it."

"What is it, a sort of dog show?" Doris asked mischievously.

"No," Dave explained. "It hasn't anything to do with dogs. Cowboys ride up to a free steer and wrestle it to the ground by the nose and horns. It is very exciting, and dangerous."

Kitty wrinkled her nose.

"And cruel," she added.

"I want to ride into town," Doris said. "I intend to poke through the—stores."

"Well, it looks as if we separate for the day," Marshmallow commented. "Tell Plum he can use

the car, Mother. Dave and I are going to ride over with the cowboys on horseback."

Kitty and Doris watched Plum and Mrs. Mallow drive off, and then swung into their saddles.

"Don't you try any bull-dogging," Doris warned Dave. "I prefer you in one piece."

"I won't go at all, if you like," Dave offered. "I'd just as soon ride into town. I need a haircut."

"Ain't no barber in Raven Rock, pard," laughed one of the horse-wranglers. "We just uses the hoss-clips on ourselves, here."

Everybody laughed, and Doris and Kitty touched spurs to their ponies and trotted off toward town, Wags sitting on the horse with Doris.

"Just compare this with sitting back in a cabin plane at a hundred miles an hour," gasped Kitty through the bitter dust, as the girls jogged along.

Eventually Raven Rock was reached.

"What's all the excitement?" Doris wondered.

For Raven Rock something unusual was astir. Usually two persons seen at any one time in the street constituted normal traffic, but fully a dozen men and two or three women were headed toward the railroad station.

From afar came the wailing whistle of a locomotive. The pedestrians doubled their pace.

"Hear that?" a stranger called to the girls as they drew rein in the plaza. "That's ol' Number Ten, the Kansas City Limited, whistlin' for a stop.

'Always uster go through here so fast we never could count the cyars!"

"This must be history in the making for Raven Rock," Doris laughed. "Let's see the important people who are getting off the Limited."

The crack train thundered into the little adobe town, overshooting the station by fifty yards in its haste. Curious townsfolk surged forward toward the Pullmans.

"Look, Kitty, even our friend who backed into us is down to see the train come in," Doris exclaimed. "There is his car."

Just then an unusual movement beneath the last car caught Doris's eye.

It was the dining car, and from the space created by the steps and the folding section of floor that drops over them when the door of the car is closed, a pair of legs emerged.

Unseen by anyone but the two girls, a slender male figure squirmed to the ground and ran hurriedly to the station, rubbing cinders from his eyes.

"Kitty! Look at that man! It's the stowaway!" gasped Doris.

"As I live and breathe, it is! He got here anyhow," her chum exclaimed. "Well, you must admire his pluck."

"Here come the important people who stopped the Limited," Doris said.

Trailed by the little crowd of townsfolk, whose

attention was obviously divided between the great train now beginning to move and the passengers who had honored Raven Rock by disembarking, three men strode over the cinders.

"Why—why, they are with Henry Moon, the man who backed into us," Doris gasped. "Then they must be—oh, Kitty!"

"Doris, what is the matter? You are as white as a sheet!" Kitty cried.

"That dark-faced man. He—he—oh, I'm sure he is one of the men who robbed Uncle Wardell!"

Kitty joined Doris in staring at the three men.

"Have them arrested!" she said. "Quick!"

"How can I?" Doris wailed. "I can't prove that they are crooks! Oh, look at them! If only Uncle Wardell were here!"

The two recent passengers on the Limited jumped into Moon's car, while that worthy took his place behind the wheel and stepped on the starter.

The mechanism whirred, but the car did not move.

Doris and Kitty saw Moon's lips curl.

He reached into a pocket of the car and took out a crank, then climbed from the automobile.

The stowaway slouched forward.

He spoke to Moon, as if suggesting a bargain. Moon gave the youth the crank and resumed his place at the wheel.

The stowaway began cranking the car with a vigor surprising in one so slightly built. Soon the engine coughed, back-fired and roared into life.

Moon let in the clutch and as the car shot forward the youth leaped to the running board and climbed into the back seat.

"They're going out beyond the town," Kitty cried, but Doris had already seen Moon's hands twist the wheel. She dug the spurs into her horse's flanks and the startled animal bolted down the road.

Kitty, amazed and wondering, whipped after her.

In less than a minute Doris heard Moon's horn wailing behind her. Without slacking the rangy gallop of her mount she reined to the right side of the road.

As the car shot past Doris had a good look at the four occupants, all of whom were staring at her with unconcealed admiration.

"That stowaway is some relative of Miss Bedelle, I'm sure," Doris thought, as the car passed. "He is the black-sheep brother, and that man beside him is the scar-nosed scoundrel who was talking over the telephone near Plainfield when I was calling the airport. Get along!"

Doris plied whip and spur, and the cow-pony's unshod hoofs drummed on the clay. The game little horse was no match for a powerful motor,

however, and soon the automobile was so far ahead Doris knew she had no chance of trailing it.

She reined in her horse, and reluctantly turned its head back toward Raven Rock.

"Poor fellow," Doris said, leaning over to pat the animal's forehead. "It's cruel making you run so hard on a hot day, but I wish you were a motorcycle for half an hour."

A mile back Doris saw Kitty advancing toward her at an easy lope, Wags panting far in the rear.

"D-Doris!" gasped that young woman. "I—never—saw anybody ride—like you did! I couldn't—begin to keep up with—you! Whew!"

"I hoped to see where those scoundrels were going," Doris replied soberly. "But I failed. Kitty, we are in for trouble. I had planned to ask Uncle Wardell to come out as quickly as he could, but we can't wait. We just have to get back those stolen deeds!"

CHAPTER XV

OIL!

CHAPTER XV

OIL!

"LET's get off and rest," Kitty begged. "Then we can plan, too."

Doris led the way to a grove of pinons, scrubby evergreens which bear an edible nut.

"I'm glad to lie down," she sighed, as she flung herself on the fragrant needles that covered the ground.

Side by side in the shade on top of the knoll the girls silently watched the ponies grazing on the coarse grass.

"Kitty," said Doris at last, "you remember the time we had the blow-out on the way to the airport, the day we started for Raven Rock?"

"Indeed I do," Kitty replied. "I skinned a knuckle helping Marshmallow take off the spare."

"I went to a road-stand to telephone, you remember," Doris went on. "Well, in an adjoining booth a man was telephoning in a mixture of Spanish and English. He was telling somebody over long distance that he was starting out with the deed at once."

"Why did you keep it a secret?" Kitty asked, a little hurt.

"I told Dave, and he telephoned to the police," Doris explained. "I thought it best to say no more because it would do no good and only worry the rest of you."

"Well, go on," Kitty urged. "What about him?"

"I saw the man when he left the booth, and he had a scar over his nose, just like the man who visited the Gates twins, and who attacked Uncle Wardell."

"Doris! Why, I should have screamed!"

"No, you wouldn't have," Doris laughed. "Anyhow, that is the man who got off the train a moment ago. I recognized him then and made sure of it when he passed me in the automobile again!"

"Oh, what will you do?" Kitty cried.

"That's just what I don't know," Doris admitted. "One thing is certain. He and his pal brought the stolen papers with them, and Moon is the master mind behind the whole crooked piece of business."

"Doris! Then they can prove ownership of the land between the Saylor's ranch and Miss Bedelle's!" Kitty exclaimed. "There must be some way to stop them."

"I don't trust the man in the court-house," Doris continued. "He doesn't know his business at all, and I think if it came to a showdown between three men with lots of money—and the deeds—and a

girl who hadn't anything to prove her story, there is no doubt who would win."

"Let's ride back to the ranch, find out where the boys are and consult them," Kitty suggested.

"I guess four heads are better than two in a mixup like this," Doris agreed, rising.

The ponies, trained not to stray when the reins were flung over their heads, were mounted. Doris, first in the saddle, instinctively let her eyes stray over the circumference of the horizon. The strange scenery would never grow wearisome to her, she thought. It was like being on the moon or some other distant world.

Then, suddenly, a volcano seemed to leap into life just a few miles away.

"Kitty!" cried Doris. "Look!"

"D-Doris! What is it? An explosion?"

A tall black plume that mushroomed at the top into a whirling smudge of ugly brown mounted into the sky.

"I don't know—it looks like a geyser," Doris marveled. "But geysers aren't black. Let's go see."

"Look down there," Kitty pointed back toward the town. "Others are coming to look, too."

A string of horsemen could be seen galloping up the road, lashing their mounts. A couple of automobiles, loaded beyond capacity, cut through the riders and hid them in dust.

"Come on, Kitty!" Doris shouted, wheeling her pony. "We'll beat them all!"

They did not. The ponies, still winded from the first gallop, were passed by some of the riders on fresher horses. That was just as well, for the leaders soon left the road and cut across lots, and the girls followed.

Both automobiles, forced to stick to the road, lost their first-won advantage.

"Oil, oil, oil!" was shouted by everyone.

It was a five-mile run that exhausted horses and riders, but weariness was forgotten when the girls caught sight of the wild scene.

The spurt of crude oil shot into the air in a column as thick as a man's body. Straight up it surged for a hundred feet or more before the wind caught it and whipped the high-pressure fluid into yellow spume.

"I'm glad the wind is blowing the other way from us," Kitty said.

The bowl-like valley from whose center the oil spouted was littered with lumber, shattered remains of the drill rigging, and dotted with what seemed to be the entire population of the county.

"There is Moon's car," Doris pointed.

"How do they catch the oil?" Kitty wondered. "It will all be wasted, it seems to me."

Her curiosity was shortly satisfied. Under the bellowed orders of a straw-boss, scarcely heard

above the roar of the spouting oil, a gang of men dragged gigantic mats toward the gusher. Others advanced with what seemed to be the world's biggest wrenches. It was all very confusing to the two girls, and to most of the other spectators, too.

All that they knew was that a fascinating battle was being fought between puny men and one of Nature's greatest forces, unleashed.

Time and again the men advanced, only to have their tools whirled high into the air.

Then, as suddenly as it had started, the oil ceased to spout.

A cheer arose from the workers and spectators alike.

"They capped it! Hooray!"

Another gang was busy throwing up walls of earth to conserve the oil flooding the ground.

"Well, that was thrilling," Doris said. "Even if it just means another set-back for us. Oil! That is really why they want the land."

"Why, Doris! Would you believe it," Kitty exclaimed, "it is way after three o'clock. We've been here hours and hours."

"I guess we had better go back to the ranch," Doris said.

They were halted by a "hello" from the milling crowd around the capped well.

"Hi, Doris! Kitty!"

"It sounds like Dave and Marshmallow," Doris

exclaimed. "But I don't see them. Oh, can that be they?"

Two inky-faced figures on black ponies were spurring up the slope toward the girls.

"What is this, an Uncle Tom's Cabin show or a minstrel?" Doris laughed, as Dave and Marshmallow, bathed in oil, galloped up on oil-soaked ponies.

"Boy, what a bath!" Dave shouted. "We were just over the hill there when the well went off with a roar that seemed to lift the ground from under our feet. Just as we got there the oil came down on top of us."

"Nothing will ever taste the same to me again," Marshmallow mourned.

"We'd better get back to the ranch," Doris said when she had recovered her breath. Kitty was holding fast to the high pommel of her saddle, weak from laughter.

"I'm sort of wary about turning in the horse and my borrowed clothes in this shape," Dave admitted.

"Anyhow, crude oil is good for your hair," Doris said. "Let's go!"

It was a long jaunt back to the ranch, and as they jogged along the boys told of their experience.

"That well is on some of the land they can't find an owner for," Dave said. "It's the far corner of the three sections Plum took us over yesterday."

"I thought it looked familiar," Doris said thoughtfully.

"That man Moon was awfully mad," Marshmallow chuckled. "We—Dave and I and all the cowboys except the one who was wrestling a steer and didn't know what was going on—were the first ones on the scene. Moon was there with three other men, all of 'em oil-soaked, ordering the drillers around. When we got there he tried to chase us away."

"By the time he had us backing off," Dave laughed, "everybody else was swarming in from the other side."

"Do you know who the three men with him were?" Doris asked.

"Of course not," Dave answered.

"You have met one, more or less socially," Doris said with a wry smile. "The other two are not unknown to my family."

"Oh, lay off the riddles," Marshmallow said. "Are you just fooling, Doris?"

"No," came the answer. "One of them was the stowaway, and the others were the men who robbed Uncle Wardell!"

"Honest!" exclaimed Marshmallow. "Let's go back and tackle them!"

CHAPTER XVI

PLANS

MARSHMALLOW's rash proposal about fighting was voted down.

It was a droll cavalcade that trotted into the yard of Crazy Bear Ranch later.

Yellow dust had settled thick over the oil on the boys. The girls were only a little less covered. Altogether they were a queer-looking crowd.

"What has happened?" Mrs. Mallow cried, as she ran out to meet them.

"Is—are you—you?" she demanded. "Marshall! The only way I could recognize you was by your shape."

"We're all right, Mother," Marshmallow responded. "Just got a little crude oil on us. Doris said it was good for freckles or something."

"We'll explain as soon as we have bathed," Dave said.

"We'll have plenty to tell," Doris cried over her shoulder, as she darted for her room.

There, in tubs of cold water filled by hand, the girls scrubbed themselves clean and with real relief changed into airy, fluffy afternoon frocks that would have graced the veranda of any country

club, and were particularly charming in the rough-and-ready surroundings of the ranch.

The boys were tardy in appearing, and when they made their entrance in linen knickers and white shirts open at the throat they still exhaled an aroma of oil.

"Let's sit under the trees," Mrs. Mallow suggested. "Then you can tell me everything."

Marshmallow first interviewed Mrs. Saylor, and successfully, for he returned with a large pitcher of milk, glasses for all, and a plate of sliced cake.

"Now we can talk comfortably," he grinned.

"But do talk," Mrs. Mallow urged. "I'm still all at sixes and sevens. Tell me what happened."

The boys told their story first.

Then Doris related her surprising share of the day's adventures.

"We shall have to act quickly, then," Mrs. Mallow announced as Doris concluded. "I think you might consult Mr. Plum. I am sure he can help, and I know he is not on the side of the oil speculators."

"Oh, Plum's an old fossil," growled Marshmallow.

"Why, Marshall!" his mother exclaimed. "Such disrespect. You should have come with us this morning. We explored the most fascinating ruins!"

"I'd like to make a fascinating ruin out of—I mean, out of those robbers," Marshmallow said.

"Don't let the cake take the edge off your appetites," Mrs. Saylor called from the house. "Supper in half an hour—with hot corn-bread!"

The young folks waved to her in assent and greeting.

"Come on, a council like us ought to be able to plan a campaign to outwit the crooks before supper," Dave urged. "Who has any ideas?"

"They are tough customers," Marshmallow cautioned. "And remember that they have the less desirable element of the country backing them up. There's no use trying any force."

"Do you suppose they suspect us?" Mrs. Mallow said.

"I don't know," Doris replied. "If that sleepy-headed registrar of deeds ever wakes up enough to tell Moon I was trying to locate the old claims there will be some sort of trouble, I expect."

"Suppose we get Mr. Saylor to pick his strongest and most trusted men," Marshmallow suggested, "and we will waylay the outfit along the road, tie 'em up and make them give up the deeds."

"I thought you just said there was no use trying force," Doris remarked.

"What about this for a plan?" Dave spoke up. "I'll see if Pete can borrow Miss Bedelle's plane and he and I can pretend to be barnstormers.

We'll take the thieves for a ride and threaten to pitch them overboard unless they give up the papers."

"I think you boys have been watching too many movie serials," Doris laughed. "No, Dave. In the first place, they may not buy a ride, and in the second place they may not have the deeds with them and there you would be, flying around with the men afraid to land. And finally, Miss Bedelle might not lend her new airplane."

"Gosh, it is a tough nut to crack," Marshmallow admitted.

"I still think you ought to consult Mr. Plum," Mrs. Mallow said. "He knows the country and the people."

"All right. Where is he?" decided Doris, jumping to her feet.

"He has gone away for a few days on business," Mrs. Mallow said. "He has to survey a new irrigation project."

"We can't wait for him," Doris determined. "We must act quickly. I think the best thing of all is to get Miss Bedelle to help us. I'm sure she is as much opposed to the oil scheme as anyone."

"I believe you are right," Mrs. Mallow said. "Besides, we owe her a call, to thank her for the use of her plane."

Further discussion was discontinued at that

juncture by the announcement that supper was ready for them.

"We'll drive over in the morning," Doris said firmly, as the five trooped into the dining room.

Marshmallow's eyes suddenly sparkled, and he snapped his fingers.

"Did you forget something?" Kitty asked. "Or remember something?"

"Just—er, just remembered that I wanted to bring some candy back from the village," Marshmallow stammered. "Want to ride over with me after supper, Dave? My sweet tooth is aching."

"Why, I guess so," Dave replied, passing the fried ham to Doris.

Marshmallow ate hastily.

"Hurry up, Dave," he kept urging his chum. "We want to get there before the stores close."

"I never saw anybody get such a sudden yearning for candy," Kitty said. "I wonder if there isn't some pretty Mexican girl in the shop. Perhaps I had better go with you."

"Oh, you'll get your clean dress all dusty," Marshmallow protested. "We'll be back in a jiffy."

The boys excused themselves while the three others lingered over the tea cups.

"I never saw Marshall refuse a second helping of dessert," Mrs. Mallow said, her brows knit.

"They are up to something, and it isn't candy,"

Doris observed sagely. "Watch out for practical jokes. I think Marshmallow is getting a little bored with this life."

"What, after being practically blown up by an oil well, and hobnobbing with cowboys?" Kitty exclaimed.

"I just have a hunch," Doris said. "We'll fool them by going to bed early. I'm about dead for sleep."

"And I," Kitty seconded.

It was scarcely nine o'clock when Doris, Kitty and Mrs. Mallow retired to their respective rooms. The boys had not yet returned.

Doris was awakened by an insistent rapping on the door from a dream in which she was galloping over the country pursuing an airplane on horseback.

"Who's there?" she called.

"It is I, Mrs. Mallow," came the reply. "Doris, I am so worried. Marshall and Dave have not yet returned and it is past eleven o'clock."

Doris jumped from the bed and slipped a kimono over her pajamas as she switched on the light. Kitty sleepily demanded what the matter was, but Doris first opened the door to admit Mrs. Mallow.

She, too, was in dressing gown and slippers.

"I am worried about the boys," she confessed. "I usually don't worry about Marshall at all. I know he can take care of himself—back home in

Plainfield, but in this rough frontier country I am ill at ease."

"This is Saturday, isn't it?" Doris asked. "There is nothing to worry about. They have gone to the weekly movie show. Even Mr. and Mrs. Saylor drove to town, and most of the ranch hands rode in."

"That must be it," Mrs. Mallow sighed. "You are such a comfort, Doris! I'll go back to bed now, but I know I shan't sleep until they are back."

Kitty stretched her graceful arms and yawned unabashed.

"If you can't sleep, Mrs. Mallow, why not sit up with us a while?" she suggested. "I've had a beauty nap, and am all rested."

"Oh, no," Mrs. Mallow protested. "You girls get all the sleep you can. Some day you will realize how a mother worries over little nothings."

She rose to go, and had just put her hand on the knob of the door when the sound of a motor was heard in the yard.

"There they are now!" Doris exclaimed.

"It may be the Saylors returning," Mrs. Mallow said. "I'll just wait and see."

The three waited in silence.

Footsteps approached, hesitated, and then continued past the door.

"Is that you, Dave?" Doris called.

There was no reply.

"Marshall!" Mrs. Mallow cried out, her voice sharp with anxiety.

The sound of gruff whisperings could be heard.

"I told you they were up to some joke," Doris said under her breath. She tip-toed to the door and suddenly threw it wide.

"Boo!" she shouted. "You can't fool—oh!"

The girl reeled back and slammed the door.

"It—it's that Moon man, and somebody else!" she gasped.

"Oh dear, oh dear," moaned Mrs. Mallow. "And we are here by ourselves."

"Say, inside there," demanded someone from beyond the door. "Open up!"

"You had better get away in a hurry," Doris cried back bravely. "You are trespassing!"

"No, I'm not," came the reply. "I'm a deputy sheriff and I'm here with Mr. Moon who claims that two young fellers living here tried to burglarize his room at the hotel."

The occupants of the room looked at one another, speechless.

Kitty dived under the covers, but Doris hurried to her clothes and began to dress as rapidly as possible.

Presently she was clad, and opened the door again.

"What you say is absurd," she said.

"I'm sorry, lady, but I'm only doing my duty,"

said a man, flashing his badge. "You'll have to let me look in the boys' room."

Doris was thinking quickly. How could she hold off these men?

"If they're in their room—which they won't be —we'll wake 'em quick enough," Moon laughed evilly. "Come on, Sheriff. Look in the next room."

CHAPTER XVII

THE PLOT THAT FAILED

CHAPTER XVII

THE PLOT THAT FAILED

Doris, her heart in her mouth, followed the men to the door of the chamber occupied by the two boys.

"Is this where they sleep?" the deputy sheriff demanded.

Doris refused to answer.

"Try it anyhow, Sheriff," Moon commanded.

The officer rattled the doorknob and then pushed violently against it. Under his weight the door flew open.

"Here, show a light," Moon laughed again. "I guess we'll find the place empty."

Doris's hair almost rose on end as she heard a voice, unmistakably Dave's, murmur sleepily:

"Wha-what's the matter? Who's there?"

The sheriff struck a match, and by the dim flare revealed the two boys in their beds, covered to their chins. Dave was blinking sleepily, but Marshmallow, his mouth open, snored gently.

"I guess you were wrong, Mr. Moon," the officer said.

"I—well, I could have sworn—" stammered the discomfited Moon.

"What's the matter, Doris?" Dave demanded, now wide awake.

"I don't know, but it is outrageous," stormed the girl. "Now, will you men please leave these grounds at once before I call for help!"

"I'm sorry, lady, but I was just doin' my duty," the sheriff apologized, backing away.

Henry Moon, speechless, was already in full retreat. A moment later the car was heard to move off into the warm, dark night.

"Are they gone?" came from Marshmallow.

"Yes," Doris replied. "And will you two please—"

"Explain?" Dave finished for her. "Certainly!"

Throwing back the covers, he jumped from the bed, fully clad, as Doris switched on the light.

Marshmallow followed suit, likewise revealing himself in the clothing he had worn at the table.

"It's a long story, mates," Marshmallow grinned.

"But first make sure that those men have really gone," Dave cautioned.

"I'll tell Mrs. Mallow and Kitty that everything is all right," Doris said.

She paused at the door of her room and Kitty's to tell the news, and then made sure that Moon and the deputy sheriff had gone.

A few minutes later all five were assembled in the boys' room, the two girls and Mrs. Mallow listening with horror to the boys' story.

"It was all my idea," Marshmallow began, "and if you think I'm bragging, I'll confess that nothing came of it.

"It flashed over me just before dinner, this scheme, and I gave Dave the sign to come down to the village with me—alone. We knew that Saturday night meant big doings, especially with the movie show on, so our scheme shouldn't have fallen through."

"What scheme?" Doris exclaimed. "Don't be so mysterious!"

"Patience, patience," Marshmallow advised. "We went to the Raven Rock Ritz, that magnificent hostelry where Moon and his two friends are stopping, and Dave and I took a room there, too."

"What in the world for?" demanded Mrs. Mallow. "Are you dissatis—"

"Sh! All will be revealed," her son grinned. "It cost only two dollars, and we didn't pay that, having to leave sort of unceremoniously. In signing the register we looked over the page for Henry Moon's name and got the number of his room. There are only eight or ten in the hotel, and we found that his was at the end of the one and only corridor on the first and only floor.

"So Dave and I sauntered down. Somebody was saying in an excited sort of voice, 'I tell you, she found it all out. She's wise.' Then and there we knew there wasn't much time to waste."

"They were talking about you, of course," Dave interrupted, indicating Doris.

"We walked out front, then, where we could keep an eye on the hall door," continued Dave, "and after a while Moon came out with the Bedelle boy—the stowaway, you know—and the two men. We watched them go up the street a little way, then we went back to Moon's room, tried the key to our room in the lock—and it worked!"

"Marshall!" Mrs. Mallow exclaimed in a shocked voice. "You could have been arrested! That is—"

"We almost were arrested, as you know," Marshmallow admitted. "But when one is on the trail of thieves one has to take risks.

"Anyhow, we went into the room and I kept watch at the door while Dave started a search for the stolen papers."

"I hunted everywhere," Dave said, picking up the thread of the story. "In the bureau, in the pockets of a suit hanging in the closet, and then I started to look for suitcases when I heard Marshmallow give a sort of gurgle!"

"Maybe I did gurgle," Marshmallow admitted. "I wanted to yell, but knew I mustn't."

"Because," said Dave, "when I glanced past Marsh down the hall where Moon and his two friends were coming, they saw us and began to run in our direction."

"Oh, dear! Oh, dear!" Mrs. Mallow moaned softly.

"So we dived through the open window," Marshmallow continued. "Moon poked his head out of the window right over us and yelled, 'There they go!' "

"The next thing he said was, 'It was those two young cubs from the Crazy Bear Ranch! I should have known they weren't in this forsaken hole for fun!' " Dave interjected.

"Then the orders flew," Marshmallow went on. "He told one man he called Wolf to stand guard, right in the room. Then he asked a fellow he called Sam to come with him, as he was going to get the sheriff and drive out toward the ranch and catch us on the way."

"We sneaked up to the front of the hotel," Dave said, "and there was our car, of course, parked in the street. Moon recognized it, so he made this Sam fellow get in the back and crouch down, to grab us when we got in."

"That gave us our idea," Marshmallow laughed.

"But how did you get here, then?" Doris cried.

"With Moon and the sheriff!" roared Marshmallow. "Right near us Moon's car was parked well in the dark, so Dave and I jumped into the rear compartment and pulled a lot of oily slickers and dungarees over us. Soon Moon came along with the deputy, raving about how he had caught

us stealing everything he owned and flashing a gun at him. They got in the car and drove to the ranch.

"So, when Moon was turning in here, and we figured he and the sheriff were looking sharp at the house, Dave and I dropped out, and ran around the back way while they parked in front. We hopped into bed, and that's all."

"You took desperate chances, boys, and rather illegal ones, I am afraid," said Mrs. Mallow. "You have aroused the suspicions of Mr. Moon in the bargain."

Doris thanked the boys sweetly for all they had done in her behalf. Dave and Marshmallow were rather crestfallen as goodnights were exchanged and everyone repaired to bed and to sleep, if possible, after the exciting events.

In the morning, as the five trooped across the patio to their breakfast, Miss Bedelle's airplane roared overhead, and all wondered where she was going at such an early hour.

The breakfast was just about over when a familiar-sounding automobile drove into the yard and Ben Corlies jumped out. Without the least ceremony he dashed into the house and hurled something on the table with a cowboy whoop that brought everyone to his feet.

"Why—oh! My handbag!" cried Mrs. Mallow. "Mr. Corlies, how can I ever reward you?"

"Don't talk that way, Ma'am," Ben grinned. "Jest open the bag and see if all your belongings is in it, for I didn't lift the clasp on it."

"If you will excuse me, then?" Mrs. Mallow smiled, and the smile grew as she examined the contents of the handbag. "Everything is here. Where did you find it?"

"Miss Bedelle found it," Ben said. "She found it between the wall and a seat of that cast-iron katydid you all flew out here in."

"We will drive over some time today and thank her," Mrs. Mallow declared. "We owe Miss Bedelle many more thanks besides."

"Well, I—I don't know," Ben said, shuffling his feet and twisting his sombrero. "I don't think Miss Bedelle would like any company just now. Anyhow, she ain't home. She flew off this mornin' in a hurry with Pete Speary."

Then, as if overcome with indignation, Ben blurted out:

"It's that ornery brother of hers, an' I hope he gets bucked off his hoss into a cholla cactus! He's showed up again, and no one knows where from, but he got into a peck of trouble somewheres along the line. I ain't no eavesdropper, but Miss Bedelle had to fly over to some place in a hurry this mornin' to straighten out the mess, an' I don't know where the boy lit out to at all. He was missin' again last night."

"I can tell you," Marshmallow spoke up. "He was at the hotel last night with that Henry Moon who is bossing the oil crew."

Ben's face darkened, and he shifted the holster in which his long-barreled six-gun rested.

"Those crooks, hey?" he snarled. "They got their orders to keep off our land, and I'm one person who will keep 'em off, too! And now the boy has got mixed up with 'em, has he?"

Doris stared into her empty cocoa cup.

"Ben," she said, lifting her clear blue eyes to the rancher, "I'll tell you a secret. Those men are our enemies, too. We are certain they stole some very valuable papers, deeds to the land they are drilling on, from my uncle."

Ben's jaw dropped.

"Is that the truth, now?" he exclaimed. "Well, Miss Bedelle will help you all she can. She'll be glad to have you come up, I know. And Ben Corlies'll stand by you, come rain or shootin', or I'm a—"

Words failed him. He strode up and solemnly shook hands all around.

CHAPTER XVIII

DORIS'S DISAPPEARANCE

CHAPTER XVIII

DORIS'S DISAPPEARANCE

"We won't make another move, now, until Miss Bedelle gets back," Doris decided.

"That is the wisest plan," Mrs. Mallow said. "It is Sunday and Mr. Moon probably won't do anything today."

Ben, muttering to himself, announced that he, at any rate, had plenty to do.

"I've got to round up Miss Bedelle's brother," he said.

Refusing Mrs. Mallow's repeated offer to reward him for returning the purse, Corlies very soon drove off.

"Everything looks brighter and more cheerful," Kitty observed. "We have a powerful new ally, Mrs. Mallow has her money and rings back, and Marshmallow and Dave are still out of jail."

The day was spent in scanning the skies for the airplane, but to no avail. Wherever Miss Bedelle's errand had taken her, it was no one-day trip, even in an airplane.

It was a somewhat disappointed group, therefore, that retired that night, but morning brought new excitement.

Doris had just asked the boys to drive her into town, and had been reminded that the automobile had been abandoned at Raven Rock, when a man rode into the yard, tossed the reins over his cayuse's neck, and asked for Miss Force.

"I am Miss Force," Doris said, stepping forward.

"I got a telegram for you, Miss," the stranger grinned amiably. "It came late last night, but I knew there wasn't any hurry about it, because your uncle won't get here until after sun-down."

"My uncle!" repeated the amazed Doris. "What do you know about my uncle?"

"Well, I declare, now," said the strange messenger boy, fishing in the crown of his huge hat and extracting the envelope. "Here, read it yourself. I seen the operator typing it out."

Doris ripped open the envelope and read:

"Your Uncle John took air express should arrive Monday.—Wardell Force."

The girl handed the telegram to her companions.

"How do you know he won't arrive until after sun-down?" she demanded of the messenger.

"The air-line don't go through Raven Rock," he explained. "Prob'ly wouldn't stop here if it did. It lands down at the junction, and your uncle can make the 5:07 from there that gits in here 'bout 7:30."

"Well, I am certainly thankful to you for all the

extra information," Doris laughed. "This is the first time I learned more from a telegram than the sender wrote."

"Oh, you're welcome," grinned the young man, blushing for no reason at all. He leaped into his saddle and rode off.

"Better and better!" Dave cried. "Say, when the army of 'General' Force moves on the enemy, won't they get a shock?"

"Now that Uncle John can take charge of the affairs himself, perhaps we had better not interview Miss Bedelle until he arrives," Doris suggested.

"A fine idea," praised Dave. "Now what shall we do?"

"Let's ride over the property again to make sure we remember the boundaries that Plum showed us," Doris said. "Then we can point out to my uncle exactly what the lay of the land is, so far as we know it."

"Good!" cried Marshmallow. "Maybe Mrs. Saylor will pack us a lunch."

Mrs. Saylor would, and did. The young folks donned their riding clothes, and the middle of the forenoon saw the cavalcade mount the rise above the ranch house, wave goodbye to Mrs. Mallow, and then vanish over the slope. Poor Wags, his paws swollen from an encounter with a fish-hook cactus, had to remain behind.

None realized into what thrilling adventures they were riding, as they spurred on their horses.

After locating the first boundary post, or bench-mark as Plum had called it, the quartet decided that such success deserved a treat, and so they had their lunch.

"Let's take a bee-line from here and cut across to the opposite marker, instead of looking for the next one on this side," Doris proposed.

"Good, that will test our plainscraft and take us over new country, too," Dave seconded.

Instead of following the four sides of the great square, the friends struck diagonally across the first "section."

It was rough going, and confusing. Cattle paths criss-crossed the earth, hills and deep gullies forced the group to detour. They crossed the road over which Marshmallow had driven them early the week before, the only familiar spot in the landscape.

"Pss-st!" whispered Doris, who was for the time being in the lead.

Following her outstretched finger, the others saw a solitary horseman clambering up the steep sides of a hill about a quarter of a mile away.

"What's a man want to climb up there for?" Marshmallow panted. "It's hard enough riding along the level."

"Everybody duck!" Doris commanded. "I have a hunch! Into this gully, quick!"

Four horses were wheeled on their hind legs and were forced over the stony brink of a small arroyo.

"Golly, what's the idea?" Marshmallow demanded.

"I have an idea that man is going up the hill to be a lookout," Doris said. "He's the one who ducked out of sight when we went through here with Plum."

"A lookout for what?" Kitty asked, bewildered.

"That's what we'll find out," Doris said grimly. "Marshmallow, you creep up the bank of this gully and keep your eye on that horseman, and Dave, suppose you walk on and see where this leads to."

The boys obeyed as if they had recognized Doris as the leader of the expedition. The girls remained on the spot, holding the bronchos.

Marshmallow inched his one hundred and seventy pounds up the shelving side of the arroyo, while Dave, hugging the bank, moved forward as rapidly as caution permitted to scout the lay of the land.

"Your spy is perched on top of the hill," Marshmallow called down softly. "Most of the time he looks toward the town, I think. Now he's looking all around."

"Keep an eye on him until Dave comes back," Doris replied.

Kitty looked at her chum with new respect.

"It's too bad you are going to waste your time

on opera singing," she said. "You would make a success as manager of something—a store or a detective agency, or an army."

"I hope we can help Uncle John settle this mystery in a jiffy," Doris said, "so I won't have to miss my lessons. And also, I want to meet Miss Bedelle."

"Nothing new," came from Marshmallow. "He's still admiring the scenery."

It was nearly half an hour before Dave reappeared, but there was excitement written in his every move as he came toward them.

"There's a gang working down below here," he called softly, when he came within ear-shot. "I think they are drilling."

"How far?" Doris demanded.

"About a half mile from here the gully opens into a big bowl, like a crater," Dave reported. "It is pretty deep, and they are down at the bottom."

"Did you hear that, Marshmallow?" Doris cried. "Come on down and we'll investigate."

The four mounted their patient ponies and in single file, sticking close to the bank and out of sight of the lookout, they rode forward.

"Let's hitch the horses here," Dave said at length. "We'll be in sight of the men around the next turn."

Although the ponies were trained to stand without hitching when the reins were thrown over their

necks it was concluded that the safest thing to do would be to tie them to the shrubby creosote bushes that studded the arroyo.

Then, creeping in single file after Dave, they advanced upon the land thieves.

The gully dipped downward and came to an abrupt end near the crest of the bowl-like depression Dave had described.

"There they are," he announced.

Throwing themselves flat on the ground, the four young people crept forward and peered into the hollow.

It was fifty or seventy-five feet deep and about half a mile across, and in the middle a significant steeple-like structure some twenty feet high had been erected out of new lumber.

Three or four men were busily engaged in and near the strange structure, which the four recognized as the rigging for a drill. A light truck and two cars, one of them plainly Moon's, were parked near it, and Moon himself was conspicuous in his shirt-sleeves, ordering his crew about.

Doris clutched Kitty's shoulder, and spoke so all the group could hear.

"Look," she exclaimed, "there is his coat on the slope just below, near that extra big clump of bushes."

"I see it, but what about it?" Kitty asked.

"Just look at those envelopes spilling out of the

pockets," Doris said. "I'll bet our missing deeds and papers are there."

"You've better eyes than I have," Dave commented, "and I passed the eyesight test one hundred per cent before taking up aviation. They may be papers, or they may be handkerchiefs, for all I can see."

"Well, I'll find out," Doris decided.

"How, for instance?" Marshmallow spoke over her shoulder. "Are you going back for a telescope?"

"I'm going down to get them!" Doris announced.

"Doris, you're not!"

"I shan't let you!"

"You'll be shot!"

Doris's companions chorused their protests, but she paid scant heed to them.

Instead, she crept backward, out of sight of the men in the hollow, and to the astonishment of the others tugged at a big bush until she had wrenched it from the loose soil.

"Camouflage," she explained. "Protective coloring, or whatever it's called. Is anybody looking?"

"Wait a minute," Marshmallow warned, "—the man on top of the hill—all right, he has turned again."

"Oh, do be careful," cautioned Kitty.

Holding the sprawling-branched, dense shrub in front of her, Doris sat on the ground and began to move cautiously down the slope by hitching along with her spurred heels.

"I can see, but I hope I'm not seen," she said as the others watched her descend, apprehension and doubt in their eyes. "Anyhow, my shirt and breeches and boots are the color of the ground. But phew! This bush smells like a freshly-tarred road."

Breathlessly, the three watched Doris inch down the slope. It was a dramatic scene. The plucky girl was so plainly visible to them that it was incredible she could not be seen by those in front of her.

"If the spy on the hill looks down he'll be sure to spot her," Marshmallow whispered.

"That isn't all that worries me," Dave replied. "I really don't think he will watch every bush closely. But look at that other automobile down there. Don't you recognize it?"

"No, of course not," the two others replied.

"Well, I do," Dave said. "It is Ben Corlies' car. I think he has turned traitor on us!"

"Sure enough, it's Ben's," Marshmallow gasped. "The big crook! Wait until I get my hands on him—"

"Oh, the lookout!" Kitty sputtered.

The horseman posted on top of the hill had dug

spurs into his mount and sent it scrambling down toward the drillers.

"He has seen Doris!" Kitty wailed.

"No, he's getting off," Dave exclaimed. "Look, he is creeping up the hill on his hands and knees—he has seen someone coming from that side!"

"Doris is just about in grabbing distance of the coat," Kitty added.

It was a hair-raising moment!

Suddenly, from behind them came the frightened snort of a horse, then a shrill whinny followed by the clash of hoofs against the rocks.

"Dodge!" yelled Marshmallow, throwing away all caution.

The three rolled and scrambled close to the banks of the gully as Doris's pinto dashed past them, fire in his eye, and charged down the slope —in a straight line for his missing rider!

"There goes the old ball game," yelled Dave, jumping to his feet. "You two ride as fast as you can to the ranch for help. Bring everybody. I'll stay here and cover Doris's retreat."

He pushed and tugged at Marshmallow and Kitty, saw them mount, and gallop toward the ranch.

Then Dave rushed back to see what was happening in the hollow. There was the panic-stricken pony, evidently stampeded by a snake, galloping across the bottom, and the workmen

spreading to head it off. There was Henry Moon running toward his car.

But Doris. Where was she? Dave could not see her anywhere.

He rubbed his eyes and stared again.

Doris had vanished as completely as if the ground had swallowed her!

CHAPTER XIX

TWO MISSING

NECK and neck Kitty and Marshmallow galloped up the rocky canyon.

"Can't you go faster?" Marshmallow panted.

"N-no! Can't you?" the girl called in reply.

"I didn't mean you, Kitty," Marshmallow said. "Talking to this horse."

He drummed with his heels on the broncho's lean sides.

"Dave will send Doris on his horse, I guess," Kitty gasped. "He'll hide out until we bring help."

"Li-listen," Marshmallow answered, the breath nearly jolted from his body. "Suppose I get off and go back to help D-Dave stand off those crooks. You lead my pony—whoops! Nearly went off that time!—and when yours tires, change to mine."

"You—you stick to me, Marshall Mallow!" Kitty replied. "I'm not sure of the way and I'm almost scared to death!"

"All—all right!" Marshmallow puffed. "I'll stick to you if I can stick to this grasshopper."

Saving their breath, the two galloped on in single file up the sloping arroyo. The sides grew

shallower and closer together, the ground rockier and shrubbier.

Suddenly Kitty saw Marshmallow's horse's nose pass hers, until he was a full neck in the lead.

"Where—did—your horse get its—second wind —oh! oh! Marshmallow!"

Kitty made a grab at the loose rein of her companion's steed, which was darting ahead of her, riderless.

The horses halted willingly enough, their sides heaving.

Kitty turned, prepared for the worst. What she saw was superlative to the worst.

Marshmallow had disappeared!

Kitty's chin trembled, and a tear streaked its way down her dusty cheek.

Never before in her life had she fled anything more menacing than a spider, nor had she ridden horseback except on decorous jaunts.

Now she was riding on a life-or-death mission, and—

"Kitty! Help!"

"Marshmallow! Oh, Marshmallow, where are you? Are you hurt?"

Kitty scrambled down from her mount and ran back through the waist-high rabbit-brush and creosote bushes.

"Here, give me a hand," Marshmallow's voice sounded. "I'm not hurt—much, but—ouch!"

Kitty parted the tangled shrubbery, and saw her stout companion sprawled on his back, his round blue eyes staring up at her in misery.

"I got jolted off," he said. "Knocked the breath out of me. But I'm on some kind of cactus and when I move a thousand new stickers get into my back."

Kitty saw nothing amusing in her companion's misery. She braced her toes against his, grasped Marshmallow's wrists and tugged with all her might, but his weight was too much for her.

"Wait, I have it!" she exclaimed.

"Did you mean w-e-i-g-h-t or w-a-i-t?" Marshmallow called after her. There was no situation in the world serious enough to prevent Marshmallow from finding some humor in it sooner or later.

Kitty returned, leading the ponies. She uncoiled from Marshmallow's mount the lasso which, as a matter of routine equipment, was tied to every saddle.

"Here, you hold onto the end, and I'll pull the pony ahead," Kitty directed. "That will jerk you up in one move."

"Make it a gentle jerk," Marshmallow warned.

"Come on, Kitty," the stout youth urged, as soon as he was up. "We're losing time. We must get help to Dave and Doris!"

Remounting, the pair sped on.

They reached the end of the gully and found themselves within a few rods of the back road whose forks led to the Crazy Bear and G Clef ranches.

"Now, which way is shortest?" Kitty asked.

"Right ahead, the way we are going," Marshmallow answered. "Come along, Kitty! Step on it!"

The road, rough as it was in an automobile, presented easier going than did the open ground. Side by side now, the girl and the youth swept forward in a cloud of yellow dust.

"Hi—yip-yippee!"

The yell came from behind them.

"Stop! Stop!"

Bewildered and not a little frightened, the couple drew rein. To their ears came the thunder of hoofs.

"Doris and Dave?" Kitty exclaimed hopefully.

"That wasn't Dave's voice," Marshmallow said. "Now it's up to you, Kitty. Drive to the ranch! Kill your horse if you have to, and I'll stand here and stall off whoever is after us."

"I—"

Before Kitty could make up her mind or complete her sentence the pursuit was upon them.

It was but a single rider, who galloped down upon them.

"Why, if it ain't the young folks from Saylor's!"

The cowboy pulled the bandana dust-kerchief

from his nose and mouth and stood revealed as Ben Corlies.

And Ben Corlies' car was in the hollow, next to Moon's!

"What do you want?" Marshmallow asked curtly.

"Well, now, I didn't mean to interrupt a two-some," Ben grinned apologetically. "You-all raised such a dust I thought it was an auto."

"Then you weren't looking for us?" Marshmallow queried, doing his best to be haughty. "If not, we'll just continue on our way."

"Hey, now!" Ben was serious. "This ain't no way for old friends to act. I ain't spyin' on you young folks. Land sakes, don't freeze me like this. I didn't know it was you."

"Well, what did you stop us for?" Kitty asked wrathfully. "Come along, Marshall!"

"I was lookin' for that good-for-wolf-bait Charlie Bedelle," Ben said morosely. "I found him down-town last night, all right, and I drug him home and cooped him up. But he stole my car! Stole it and got away again, and Miss Bedelle gettin' me to promise I'd keep an eye on him. How them two can be related beats me. A angel and a coyote, sister and brother!

"But you just excuse me and I'm beggin' your pardon. I'll keep on trailin' the boy."

"Wait a minute, Ben!" Marshmallow shouted.

"Ben, listen! We thought you had double-crossed us. We saw your car. It's parked next to Moon's down in a hollow over there where there is some drilling going on. We thought of course you were with him. We didn't know the car had been stolen. But listen, Doris is—"

"Back with those crooks, is he?" Ben hissed. "I'll rope and tie that little—"

"Ben, listen. Doris and Dave are back there. We're riding for help from the ranch!"

"I can clean up the whole bunch on foot and blindfolded!" Ben stormed. "Where are they?"

"Let me tell you," Kitty begged. "Just wait a moment, Ben. There is a gully a couple of miles up the road that gets wider and deeper—"

"There's a million like that," Ben interrupted.

"Sh—sh!" Kitty insisted. "The gully goes on for a long way and then ends in a sort of big bowl, and down in there the men are drilling. Doris's horse bolted while she was creeping up toward the men. Dave said we must ride for help while he stood by Doris."

"Better not go home. You'll give Mrs. Mallow a nervous shock," Ben said. "The Bedelle ranch is closer, and the fork to it is just a couple of hundred yards ahead. You go there and rouse the boys. I'll go back—but how'll I find the gully?"

A new sound was noticed by all three at once, and drew their attention skyward.

Winging its way overhead, scarcely two hundred feet above the road, was Miss Bedelle's airplane.

Ben waved his hat violently, and a flutter of white from the pilot's cockpit showed that he had been seen by his employer. By violent gestures Ben tried to indicate he was in trouble.

"Neither of you looks a bit like her brother, so she'll know it isn't Charlie with me," Ben said. "So when Miss Bedelle gets to the ranch and finds he is gone, she'll jump in her car and come out here, see? So I tell you what:

"You, young lady, wait here or down at the fork, and when Miss Bedelle shows up—no, she may not come after all. You ride to the ranch and Mallow, here, can guide me to the gully."

Before the plan could be put into execution the drumming of hoofs on the road sounded again, coming closer and closer.

"Here they come, now!" Kitty sighed in relief.

It was only a lone rider that galloped into sight, however, and that was Dave.

He reined his horse to its haunches.

"Ben's all right, Dave," Marshmallow cried out. "His car was stolen by the stowaway. Where's Doris?"

"I don't know!" Dave snapped. "I'm worried. She disappeared!"

"Did those men grab her?" Kitty cried.

"No, they weren't near her at all," Dave re-

plied. "She just vanished—dropped out of sight. Her horse got away from the men and scrambled up the slope. Then all the drillers and Moon got into their cars, so I went back to my pony and rode him up the nearest hill. From there I could see you here, and when I made out three of you, I got the wild idea somehow that Doris had caught her pony and joined you."

Kitty's face went white beneath the dust.

"It's—it's awful, Dave," she gulped.

"Worse than that," Dave muttered. "If anything happened to her—gosh, we shouldn't have let Doris try that brave stunt of sneaking up behind a bush to get those deeds."

"Listen here," Ben declared. "For safety's sake it's best we ride in pairs. You two go on to Miss Bedelle's ranch like I said, and Dave and I will hurry back to where you saw Miss Force disappear."

"Right!" Marshmallow said briefly. "Come along, Kitty. And if anyone tries to stop us I'll put up a fight and you streak for the ranch."

The party split, galloping off in opposite directions, but each to the rescue of the plucky Doris.

CHAPTER XX

ON THE TRAIL

"WHY didn't you stick around and look for the lady?" Ben asked of Dave as they galloped along.

"I told you," Dave responded glumly. "From a distance I saw three riders on the road and I thought she had found her horse and was waiting for me with the others."

"Trouble is," Ben mused, "I'm a mechanic, and not no cowboy. I know all the places in three states that a car will carry you to, but once off the roads, I'm lost."

Ben went on to explain to Dave why he was astride a horse.

"I don't think that Charlie Bedelle is in his right mind, that I don't," he added. "His sister is the salt of the earth. A squarer, better human don't tread shoeleather. Then to have an ornery little crook for a brother, ain't natural."

"It doesn't seem that way," Dave agreed. "But it doesn't help us out of this fix right now."

"Shucks, young man," Ben snorted. "You've only got one person to hunt for. I got two. It's most important to get the young lady, but then I got to track down this bad boy."

The horses, winded by the prolonged gallop, dropped into a trot. Neither lash nor spur could coax them to more than a canter for a few yards, before they resumed the easier pace.

"If only they had carburetors to tinker with I could get speed out of these nags," Ben mourned.

Dave smiled in spite of himself, but he was in a fit of depression. The young man blamed no one but himself for permitting Doris to enter upon her desperate try for the stolen deeds.

"If anything happens to her I'll never go back East," he told himself. "I'll become a hermit. I'll find a cave in the mountains here some place and live on prickly pears and jack-rabbits, and I won't talk to a human being for the rest of my life."

Then, speaking out loud, he asked:

"Are there any caves around here, Ben?"

"Caves? Golly, the hills are honeycombed with 'em," Ben answered. "Every once in a while some passel of perfessors or another comes out and explores the caves and picks out a lot of bones an' things, an' tell how the wild and fee-roc-i-ous cave-men once dwelt in these parts."

Dave grew more glum. He could not even be a hermit in a cave without having professors routing him out to search for the relics of extinct races.

"The gully is right near here," he announced. "I—what's that?"

Ben reined in.

"A horse—and not half travelin'!" he exclaimed.

Once more hope surged in the hearts of Doris's would-be rescuers.

"It's Doris!" Dave shouted.

"No, that pinto ain't got no rider," Ben said, loosening his lasso as the panic-stricken pony dashed into view.

"It's Doris's horse, though," Dave yelled.

Ben twirled the loop of the lariat, and as the animal galloped past flung his rope. The horse leaped into the air as the noose settled around its neck, and came down stiff-legged, plowing up the dirt. It stood quietly, trembling and foaming.

"See, the saddle slipped around underneath," Ben said, as he coiled the lasso, shortening the distance between the horse and himself. "That's what set the pore beast crazy."

As Ben soothed the frightened steed and worked the saddle into place, Dave shook his head quizzically. Could Doris have fallen off?

"Just a moment ago you said you were a mechanic and not a cowboy," Dave observed presently. "But you roped that horse on the dead run as neatly as could be done."

Ben blushed beneath his tan.

"I hate to admit it," he said, "but it's the first thing I ever lassoed except a fence-post. It was just dumb luck."

"Then I hope your luck holds and we find Doris

unhurt," Dave exclaimed. "It will have to work fast, that luck of yours. The sun is ducking behind the hills already."

"Let's get started, then," Ben said, taking the now soothed riderless pony into tow, and spurring his own mount forward.

They reached the gully which had led to the fateful adventure.

"This is it, for sure," Dave said. "See the hoof marks coming out of it?"

Kitty and Marshmallow had left a distinct trail, which Dave and Ben now retraced.

"No use trying to hide ourselves," Dave said. "I saw the workmen drive off, and anyhow, our riding around must have been plain to anybody watching."

"This is all part of that unclaimed land that Miss Force said her uncle and some lady friends owned," Ben observed. "Those crooks must be pretty sure of themselves to begin working on it."

"Not entirely sure," Dave said. "Else they wouldn't be so secretive about it."

It was slippery going on the down-grade. The lowering sun had passed behind the hills, and the riders found themselves in deepening shadows.

"We must find her before it gets dark," Dave repeated again and again.

Once he raised himself in his stirrups and shouted Doris's name.

"Doris—Doris—Do-do-ris-s-s!" the hills answered.

Dave sank back in his saddle, bluer than ever.

"I'm beginning to hate this country," he said bitterly. "I was in love with it up to this afternoon. But even the hills make fun of us."

Ben knew how the youth felt, and wisely said nothing.

"The road is right above us here," Dave spoke again. "Look, that's where we scrambled down when we first saw the lookout going up the hill yonder."

"Yes," Ben said, looking up. "But the road bends sharp left a little ways on, and goes downgrade until it picks up the main stem just out of Raven Rock. I guess you've been over—hello!"

At the edge of the arroyo, high above their heads, a bow-legged, wizened little figure was suddenly silhouetted. One hand was raised in command.

Dave's jaw dropped. It seemed to him as if some ancient gnome had burst out of his mountain lair to take sides in the hunt.

"Hold on, there!" came a shout, in a high, cracked voice. "Hold on!"

CHAPTER XXI

SWALLOWED UP

CHAPTER XXI

SWALLOWED UP

DORIS had started on her daring raid with full confidence that she would succeed, and came within arm's length of doing so.

A broad, flat juniper bush was between her and the goal of her adventure.

"That gives just so much more concealment," she told herself.

Doris paused a moment to make sure that no one was looking in her direction. A juniper bush suddenly sprouting an arm and rifling a coat would be too much of a surprise, even in this surprising country.

Pulling herself to her knees Doris reached forward through the sharp needles of the evergreen shrub. Just then she heard the clatter of hoofs and the crash of dislodged stones rolling down the slope behind her.

Her fingers closed upon Moon's coat, and in her haste to drag the garment toward her Doris lost her balance and fell forward.

To her amazement the bush did not check her fall and the earth seemed to dissolve into nothingness below her! Forward and downward she

plunged into darkness, to land with a thump that momentarily stunned her.

"I feel the way Alice in Wonderland did when she fell down the rabbit's hole," was the droll thought that popped into her mind as soon as she recovered her wits.

Sounds of pursuit, however, and shouts and yells from men immediately chased all whimsy from her mind. Doris looked around her, wonderingly.

"Why, that bush must have concealed the entrance to this cave," she said to herself. "And I'm not the first one to have been in here, either."

What little of the afternoon sunlight penetrated the opening over her head showed the dim outlines of many kegs and boxes.

"Was I seen?" Doris wondered. "How shall I get out of here if no one noticed me?"

She rose to her feet. The hole through which she had fallen was not more than two feet over her head. An empty box, evidently used for the same purpose by the makers of the underground chamber, served as a stepping stone. Cautiously Doris peered over the edge.

The first thing she saw was a large boulder that was obviously used to seal as well as conceal the opening to the cave by the simple expedient of rolling it across the hole. The edges of this, Doris noted, were concreted to bear the weight of the rock. By standing on tip-toe and twisting her

neck a little Doris could see past the rock, and into the bowl-like valley.

She saw the front wheels of an automobile and a corner of the lumber pile near the well rigging, but no sign of human life. Then suddenly a man dashed across her line of vision, but whether he was in pursuit of something or being pursued she could not tell.

"Now to get out," she told herself.

By gripping the edges of the opening and using her elbows as braces Doris managed to get head and shoulders above ground.

"No use, we can't catch him!"

That sentence, spoken in a gruff voice, sent Doris swiftly back into the shelter of the hole.

"Let's sit here and see what Moon wants us to do," another voice said.

"The stowaway—Miss Bedelle's brother!" Doris whispered to herself. "I know that voice!"

"If Moon's half the wizard he thinks he is, we ought to strike oil in a couple of hundred feet," the first speaker said.

"That ought to make us all rich," came from the stowaway.

"Shucks, Charlie, the money for the oil isn't a tenth of the fortune," the other said. "Selling stock to widows—there's the real profits!"

"Well, he won't sell much without my help," young Bedelle boasted.

"Don't you say that where he can hear you," the boy's companion warned. "He has a way of putting those who double-cross him where they won't bother him no more."

"Getting rid of me wouldn't help him any," the braggart continued. "My sister just about runs public opinion around here. If I coax her into giving me half the ranch with the promise I'll stay here and farm it, and then turn it over to you birds, why, everybody'll think she sold out to Moon and he can do what he wants in Raven Rock. Otherwise he has to sneak around like he's doing now."

"Don't forget we've the deeds to this land and nobody can prove ownership," the bass-voiced one went on. "When the county can be coaxed to put it up for forced sale this is all the ground Moon will need—and you may need less."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that one little plot of ground is all a dead man needs," the crook's accomplice said meaningly.

Doris, crouched in the darkness below, felt her blood run cold at the sinister tone in the man's voice.

"No wonder they wanted to get the deeds," she thought. "Why, the oil is just under the surface, and they can get at it without any trouble at all. Then they intend to sell stock for ten times what the oil wells are worth!"

The conversation outside went on steadily. Young Bedelle was boasting more and more recklessly.

"Say, I'm a pretty tough customer myself," he bragged. "I beat my way out here from Boston after putting over a big deal, but the fellows who were working with me double-crossed me and took all the money. And say, I rode out part way in my sister's own airplane, and she doesn't know it yet."

Doris smiled to herself.

"You may be mistaken about that, Charlie," she thought. "Just as your vicious companion is mistaken about Moon having the deeds."

Her hand stole to the hip pockets of her riding breeches, where the papers she had taken from Moon's pockets crackled assuringly.

"There's just one more thing to worry me," Doris said to herself. "When Henry Moon doesn't find his coat he is going to hunt for it, and when he locates it down here, where will Doris Force be?"

That thought made her decide to forego further eavesdropping and to look around the cave for a hiding place or possible second exit.

Her eyes, accustomed to the darkness now, showed her that the underground room was partly natural, partly man-made. The ceiling sloped gradually downward, forming a rough right-angled triangle. The parallel walls were about seven feet

at their highest, hewn out of the soft shale rock. The entire chamber was about fifteen feet wide and twenty feet long.

Barrels and boxes, kegs and ropes, a tarpaulin-swathed machine of some kind and many polished lengths of round steel bars were heaped on the floor.

There was certainly only one way to enter or leave the cave. As she came back to the opening, she noticed the two men still chatting.

"I wonder whom they were trying to catch," Doris mused. "Maybe it was Dave. Anyhow, they said there was no use trying to get him, whoever it was, so there is nothing to worry about, except how to get out of here."

She crept nearer the opening to listen further.

"—can't make a fool out of me," she heard the stowaway saying. "I guess I've proved I can take care of myself. Say, listen! What's that?"

"Sounds like an airplane," the other man said.

"It is! There she comes! It's my sister. Say, I'll have to ride back to her ranch," the youthful Bedelle cried.

"Scared of her, are you?" jeered the man.

"No!" snarled the youth. "That shows how much smarter I am than you. If I'm to coax her into giving me half the ranch naturally her Charlie boy must pretend to be reformed. Zowie! I hope she doesn't see me."

Doris heard sounds which indicated that the youth was leaving in a hurry. His late companion chuckled to himself several times.

"The conceited little pup," she heard the man say. "Won't we trim his sails for him!"

Doris heard the airplane roar overhead, and then for a long time silence settled over the trapped girl. Only an occasional sigh or a grunt, or the scrape of a boot against gravel, warned her that the coast was not clear.

Suddenly Moon's voice broke the silence.

"All right, Tracey," Doris heard. "We might as well run along, too."

"All right, Chief!" the bass voice replied.

Doris crouched back into the shadows as a pebble rattled down from above.

"I'll just see that no lights are burning down here," the late companion of Charlie Bedelle said, and suddenly a huge pair of boots greeted Doris's eyes.

The girl threw herself behind a row of kegs, out of sight, but also out of a vision of the man.

"Hey, Chief, here's your coat down here," boomed the man's voice, uncannily loud in the cave's narrow quarters. "Everything is all right."

Doris heard him scramble out, and then suddenly the rock was rolled over the hole and the girl was plunged into the most profound darkness she had ever experienced.

"I wonder if I can ever find the opening in this blackness, and push the rock back," she wondered.

She crept over the barrels and groped around.

"Funny how one can get lost in such a tiny place," Doris mused, as her fingers touched damp rock or splintery boards.

"If Dave didn't see me fall into the hole I'll have to stay here until morning!" Doris recalled with a start. "And Uncle John is arriving this evening! He must be almost due! What a reception for him—and Mrs. Mallow will worry herself sick."

Suddenly Doris stumbled upon the box which served as a poor substitute for stairs to the cave.

Mounted upon it, she tugged and pushed until her finger-tips were sore, but she could not stir the boulder that sealed her in the cave.

"Suppose the air gives out before morning?" she thought, and for a time her heart thumped wildly with terror. "I mustn't let myself think of such things.

"I must do something to keep busy, or else I will lose my mind. I know—I'll hide these papers under one of the kegs so they will not be found on me if I am discovered in the morning."

She took the documents from her pockets, and as she arranged them into a flat, compact parcel her fingers felt a familiar shape.

It was a paper of matches.

Just a cheap paper folder, containing waxed

paper matches, the kind that tobacconists give away by the millions, but Doris felt the same thrill of delight she would have experienced had she suddenly found Aladdin's lamp.

"I'll make a torch from one of these stiff envelopes so I can see to hide the papers," she said excitedly.

The flare of the match almost blinded her, and the little flame was close to her trembling fingers before she could see to ignite the paper torch.

By the flickering, choking fire Doris pushed and pulled at one of the kegs until she had tilted it far enough to kick the documents beneath it.

As the heavy barrel thudded back into place Doris saw black lettering stenciled on its top:

BLASTING POWDER
DANGER
KEEP AWAY FROM OPEN FLAME

CHAPTER XXII

OLD DANNY'S GRUDGE

"It's getting darker by the minute!"

Kitty, slouching in her saddle from weariness, looked for the first time without pleasure on the purpling hills, some with their peaks golden in the captured rays of an already vanished sun.

"I can see that I can't see as well," Marshmallow responded paradoxically. "Listen, Kitty. No matter what Ben said, I think you ought to go back to the ranch and tell my mother that one of the horses ran away, or something, just so she won't worry."

"Marshmallow, I—I just couldn't," Kitty cried. "She would see right away I was not telling everything. I want to be right here, doing my share to help find Doris."

"A fine active share we were given!" Marshmallow snorted.

"Listen! I hear a car!" Kitty exclaimed. "It is coming from the right direction. It must be Miss Bedelle, or someone from her ranch!"

"Listen to that motor!" Marshmallow whistled. "Some speed they're traveling!"

The approaching car, swaying and bouncing over

the rocky road, roared into view. Its headlights were already burning, and Marshmallow recklessly spurred his horse into the middle of the road where the glare shone fully upon him.

"Stop! Miss Bedelle!" he shouted, raising his hand against the approaching motor. "Miss Bedelle!"

The automobile skidded to a halt.

"Who are you?" came a woman's voice, of a rich sweetness despite the sharp note of anxiety in it.

"I have a message from Ben Corlies!" Marshmallow called. "We are in trouble."

Instead of Miss Bedelle, a man climbed out of the machine.

"I've got ye covered, my lad," he cried. "Just put up your other hand—and you too, on the other cayuse. Now then, what's your game?"

"Who—who are you yourself?" Marshmallow stammered. "Isn't that Miss Bedelle there?"

"Yes, it is, and what of it?" the man replied.

"Ben Corlies is up the road—I mean, down the canyon—looking for a girl who has been caught by the oil gang," Marshmallow explained. "He told us to wait here for you, for Miss Bedelle, I mean, to tell her where he had gone. He said that Ch-Charlie had got away with his car."

Miss Bedelle herself came forward at this juncture.

"I can't make head nor tail out of what you are

trying to say," she said. "You may put down your hands. I think you are honest. Now, explain to me again."

Marshmallow smiled in relief as he lowered his arms.

"My name is Marshall Mallow," he said. "That is Miss Norris, over there. She and I and Doris Force and Dave Chamberlin, and my mother, came here in your airplane last week to stop some crooks who had stolen the deeds to all this land. This afternoon we spotted them drilling in a hollow a few miles from where we are now. Doris was creeping down close to them when her horse broke loose and we rode to get help, and now Dave and Ben are trying to rescue Doris."

"Where did you say they was drillin'?" demanded Miss Bedelle's companion, still keeping his revolver pointed at Marshmallow.

"If you go along this road a little way, you come to a gully that gets deeper and deeper, and then ends up on the side of a big, round hollow," Kitty explained.

"I know where that is," the man said.

"Danny, we started out to get Charles, but this looks like more important work," Miss Bedelle said to the man. "Can't you help rescue the girl?"

"If that oil feller is mixed up in it, I'll pitch in just to get even with him," Danny said, lowering

his revolver. "He stampeded that herd of fillies it took us two weeks to round up and separate with his old blasting, he did. And when I told him what I thought of him, he threw a handful of dust in my hoss's eyes, he did. I aim to get even with that hombre!"

"Please, Mister," Marshmallow begged. "Don't tell us about it. Help us find Doris."

"We must hurry," urged Kitty, "for Doris may have been captured."

"A man my age ain't got no right ridin' around lookin' for foolish young girls who ought to stay where they belong and not get mixed up with crooks who ruin good horse-flesh," Danny retorted. "I aim to get even with that Moon feller, that's all."

"This will be a good way to get square with him," Kitty suggested.

"Well, I'm the man who knows how to pay off a score if I do say it myself," Danny bragged.

With that he turned on his high-heeled boots and strode back to the car.

"Don't you want to hobble your ponies and ride with us?" Miss Bedelle asked.

"Isn't your car just a two-seater?" Marshmallow inquired.

"Oh, but it will squeeze in more than two," the opera singer replied.

Investigation proved, however, that although

Kitty could easily be accommodated, there was no chance for Marshmallow to win a seat.

"You go, Kitty, and I'll ride along with your pony," he suggested.

Kitty was loyal to Marshmallow, however, and said she would ride with him, although every muscle in her body ached because of the unusual exertion.

"I'll see you later," Miss Bedelle called, as she put the powerful car into gear and spurted away.

The two riders felt a new lonesomeness as the machine vanished around the next curve.

"For the first time in my life," Marshmallow moaned, "I regret being a heavyweight. We could all be riding in that car if I were only half my size."

"Half your size, Marshall Mallow!" Kitty cried. "I wouldn't look at anyone so little."

"Well, that more than makes up for having to stick to horseback," Marshmallow laughed. "Gee, Kitty, this would be perfect if it wasn't for the mess we are in. It's a grand evening, and you and I could ride all by ourselves."

"That's what we are doing as far as I can see," Kitty retorted, but whether practically or mischievously Marshmallow could not determine.

To herself Kitty said:

"I'm so sore and stiff I'll never be able to sit down or walk or lie flat for the rest of my life. I'm

going to be bowlegged forever from riding this horse!"

The two jogged along in silence for a while.

"Look, there's a red light," Kitty cried suddenly. "It looks as if Miss Bedelle's car has stopped."

The two applied spurs to their ponies and galloped forward.

CHAPTER XXIII

DORIS'S VISITOR

"BLASTING powder!"

Doris cried the words aloud, and ground the flame of her little torch beneath her boots.

Again in utter darkness, the girl sank to the ground struggling to steady her trembling limbs. Hours seemed to drag by. Actually, scarcely five minutes passed, but to Doris, cut off from the world and unable to see her hand before her face, it seemed as if half the night had gone.

"It must be like this to be blind," she thought. "Oh, how glad I am I have my eyesight. I never realized before what it meant to have all one's faculties."

To comfort herself, Doris began to sing.

Never before, perhaps, had the strains of "Annie Laurie" fallen upon such surroundings—a pitch-black cavern that was also a veritable arsenal of possible destruction, strange setting for the beautiful notes that poured from Doris's young throat.

From the old Scottish song she turned to "Home, Sweet Home," and then choked, surprised to find her cheeks wet with tears. "Big booby!" she reproached herself. "Why choose sad songs?"

She plunged into the quick-step of an up-to-date dance tune, but she had sung only a few bars, when a reverberating noise cut her off short.

Suddenly a gleam of light cut through the darkness, and Doris saw that the stone was being moved. She jumped to her feet and retreated as far into the cave as she could.

Was it Dave? Or one of the crooks?

The light—was it morning already? To Doris's eyes, the twilight struggling into the cave was as bright to her unaccustomed eyes as the noon sun.

Fascinated, the girl watched the opening. A dangling, booted foot appeared all of a sudden, and then a man leaped lightly to the cave floor.

It was Henry Moon!

"Hello there, girlie!" he laughed. "I know you are in here. You needn't hide."

A searchlight whipped through the cave like a gleaming sword, and came to rest upon Doris.

"Oho, so there you are. Very kind of you to wait for me," the man chortled.

Doris made no reply.

"I am an informal sort of fellow," Moon continued mockingly. "I sure appreciate it when beautiful red-headed ladies come calling informally."

Doris pressed her clenched hands against her pounding heart.

"I'm sorry my quarters are so crude," Moon said. "However,—"

He stooped, and from some recess Doris had not discovered, picked up an electric lantern which he set upon a keg.

"I heard you singing," Moon went on. "Won't you oblige me with a selection? Say that old war-song, for instance, 'Where do we go from here?' "

"I think 'The Prisoner's Song' would be more appropriate," Doris returned. "For me, now—and for you later, Mr. Moon!"

"So!" Moon hissed, casting aside his mockery. "So that's what you think will be the sequel, eh?

"Listen here, you little snip, give me back those papers you took from my coat!"

"You mean the papers you had your accomplices steal from my uncle!" Doris retorted in icy, level tones.

"I mean the papers you stole from my coat, and not anything else," Henry Moon snarled. "Don't be a fool. I can take them by force if I must."

"I don't know what you mean," Doris replied, desperately fencing for time. "I saw you and your workmen drilling down here and I came down to investigate. This property belongs to my relatives, so you have no business to be drilling or even walking on it. Then I fell into this hole, and someone rolled a rock over the top."

Moon threw back his head and roared with laughter.

"I spied you behind the bush," he said. "I

don't know how you got there, but I noticed you when your horse bolted down the hill. I saw you fall, and I know just how long you have been here. Ha! Ha! Ha!"

Doris knew she was in a hopeless predicament.

Moon saw her lip tremble, and gloated at the girl's mental torture.

"Well, you are safe here," he said. "If I made you give me the papers and let you loose you would make a lot of trouble for me. I think I'll just let you spend the night here, and tomorrow I'll have my pals help me decide what we can do with you."

Doris regained her self-control instantly.

"I would rather be alone," she retorted.

"We may kill you," Moon mused. "Then again we may not, and in that case you may wish we had been merciful with a bullet or two."

He picked up the lantern and hooked it to his belt.

"If you will pardon me, then, I will rejoin my comrades who are waiting for me at the well," he said mockingly. "I gave them an excuse for returning here but it grows late and I fear me they wish to wash up before supper. Good-night—and pleasant dreams."

He leaped to the box and drew himself out of the hole. The rock thudded back into place and again Doris was alone in total darkness.

Henry Moon had no intention of leaving the

scene, however. He was a man so depraved in character, so cruel and heartless, that it gave him delight to torture his captive.

His two closest cronies, the scar-nosed half-breed who answered to the name of Wolf, and Tracey, the strongest of the trio, would wait patiently in their parked machine until he returned; Moon was sure of that. The men were his unquestioned tools to whom he had taught strict obedience.

Now he sat on the rock that sealed the cave and brushed off his clothing.

"What shall I do with that red-head?" he asked himself. "If she disappears it will be mighty bad for me, and if I let her go it will be worse.

"I wonder if any of her friends were with her and saw her fall into the cave. If they did they turned and ran like yellow curs. But they seem to be a foolhardy crowd. Those boys were in my room at the hotel, sure enough, but how they got back home before me and the sheriff, I don't know."

Furiously the crook denounced the four young folks for bobbing up on the scene of his criminal operations and spoiling his plans. As he schemed to outwit them, it was growing dark among the hills.

"Maybe I had better lure the rest of them down here and settle for them all at once," he pondered.

A muffled cry that echoed and re-echoed "Doris!" brought him to his feet. It was the cry that Dave had sent up in desperation as he rode with Ben.

While Moon plotted his schemes over her head and Dave called frantically, Doris was engaged in trying to reason some way out of her predicament. As she sat in pitch blackness, a sudden thought struck her. What if she fell asleep, and was surprised by the wicked Moon? She must keep awake!

Groping around in the darkness, she came upon the pile of steel drill rods. She lifted one. It was so heavy it was all she could do to hold it, and she could not swing it very well.

"I couldn't do much damage with one of these," she told herself.

More to keep busy than with any thought of using the steel rod, she practised swinging the iron bar, as time passed on.

Suddenly she heard the rock that sealed the opening being moved. Guided by her ears alone, for the inky darkness made her eyes useless, Doris, still holding the heavy rod, took up what she guessed was the most advantageous position to ward off an attack.

CHAPTER XXIV

MOON'S PROBLEM SOLVED

"SUPPOSING it is Dave who has come to rescue me!" flashed through Doris's mind as she braced herself to meet an unseen enemy. Over her head the stone had moved far enough to admit light.

"Dave!" Doris called. "Is that you?"

The rock, half rolled away from the entrance to the cave, was stayed by invisible hands.

"Dave!" Doris cried, raising her voice. "Dave! Help—help!"

With a sinister crunch the rock rolled back into place, plunging the captive once more into inky darkness.

Who could have moved it?

The mysterious movement of the rock unnerved Doris, and she sank to the floor, the steel bar clanging from her hands.

"I must not cry," she told herself, clenching her fists. "Buck up, Doris Force! Don't you dare give up!"

She bit her trembling lips, and by sheer willpower conquered the purely physical fear that had overcome her.

It was desperately hard to be imprisoned in total

darkness, underground, surrounded by explosives, and realizing that her friends must be searching for her or else were in dire trouble from an attempt to rescue her.

Just then the rock overhead grated in its concrete setting again, and before Doris could rise to her feet or grasp her improvised weapon, a man had dropped into the cave.

In the dim light Doris recognized Henry Moon!

To her amazement the first move he made was to pull the rock seal back over the opening. The two were instantly invisible to each other in the inky darkness.

Then the dazzling beam of an electric torch flared into Doris's face.

"So kind of you to wait for me," Moon mocked. "Now we shall have a pleasant evening, I am sure."

He set the electric lantern on a keg, and as his back was momentarily turned, Doris snatched up the steel bar and concealed it behind her, rising to her feet at the same time.

"Has the cat got your tongue, little girl?" Moon asked with a leer.

Doris did not deign to reply, but stared at the evil countenance of the crook with level, unwavering gaze. Moon was far from feeling the self-confidence he exhibited.

He had heard Dave's call to Doris, and, sure that a searching party was approaching, had rolled the

rock aside to leap into the cave when Doris, in her doubt, had cried out Dave's name.

Torn by uncertainty, the crook had rolled the stone back into place, and then, convinced that there was more safety in concealment, had carried out his original plans of settling with Doris.

"Don't be afraid to speak," he jeered. "No one can overhear us. You could scream until Christmas, and no one could hear you if he were sitting on the rock over my head."

Still Doris gave no reply. Her silence nettled Moon.

To hide his uncertainty the evil-doer lit a cigarette, and Doris saw that the hand that held the match trembled so he could scarcely make flame and tobacco meet.

"So Mr. Moon is nervous, too," she thought, new courage surging through her.

Her hands gripped more firmly the steel bar behind her.

Moon perched himself on a barrel, crossed his legs jauntily, and spoke again:

"Did anybody ever tell you you were a remarkably beautiful young woman?"

Doris did not show by the quiver of an eyelid that she had heard him.

"Beautiful or not," Moon went on, a mirthless smile twisting his lips, "you are not a help to me in my business.

"You take up too much space down here, so I will have to move you to other quarters. I am going to give you your chance to be reasonable. Will you give me a promise?"

Doris stared stonily.

"As a matter of necessity I will have to blindfold and gag you," Moon went on. "You can take your choice of submitting gracefully or submitting by force, in which case some of that beauty may be marred."

The man left his seat, and without turning his back upon the girl, retreated in the cave to a packing box, in which he groped.

His hand emerged with a coil of fibrous rope, of the sort woven by the natives of the Southwest from the leaf-fiber of yucca palm. Pliable yet tremendously strong, this kind of rope has the texture of hemp dipped in glue and ground glass and will cut through horse-hide.

"I have a handkerchief which will serve as a blindfold," Moon said, "thus enabling me to use your own for the gag. I am sorry I cannot trust you to come with me minus these precautions."

Doris still appeared as if stricken deaf and dumb. Her immobility seemed to enrage the crook.

"I'll fix you so you'll want to open that mouth of yours but won't be able to," he snarled, as rage crimsoned his face and made the veins stand out on his forehead.

Knotting a noose in one end of the rope, Moon, desperately angry, advanced slowly upon Doris who still stood, erect and calm now, her hands behind her.

The girl, however, was measuring the decreasing distance between the desperado and herself.

"Now, then, you lit—"

Moon did not finish his sentence, uttered as he made a leap for Doris. In that instant Doris quickly brought the sharp steel bar from behind her, and unsuspectingly the ugly man dashed into it with full force.

With a choking cry, half gasp, half gurgle, he toppled to the floor and rolled over on his back, the breath knocked from his body.

Doris, now empty-handed, leaped for the mouth of the cave. With the strength born of desperation she shoved against the boulder that barred her way. It was immovable. Undoubtedly some secret had to be known to swing the stone on its balance.

Frantically Doris pushed, first at one corner, then at another. Over her shoulder she saw Moon roll over, drag himself to hands and knees and then, clutching at the wall for support, draw himself shakily to his feet.

At that self-same instant Doris felt the rock move above her hands. She threw her last ounce of strength into one desperate lunge, and lost her

balance as the stone miraculously seemed to rise of its own accord.

"Hoorah!"

Doris, dazed, could not believe that she had actually heard the cheer from above.

Then, one after the other, three stalwart figures dropped into the cave.

"Doris! Where are you?"

"Dave! Here I am!"

Impulsively the youth turned and threw a protecting arm around Doris, who slumped for an instant against the friendly security of his shoulder. Yet their eyes were upon Henry Moon, who had staggered back into the darkest recess of the cave.

"Up with your hands!"

The sharp command came from Ben Corlies, whose gun was leveled at the unscrupulous thief.

The third figure was a stranger to Doris. A wizened face set above broad but bowed shoulders.

"Ye will throw dust in my hoss's face, eh?" the new ally taunted the cornered Moon.

"I guess the game is up," Moon spoke from the shadows. "I'll come along peaceably, but let me light a cigarette first."

"I guess there's no harm in that," Ben admitted, advancing toward Moon with leveled gun.

Doris saw the desperation of a cornered rat in Moon's eyes, and instinct made her cry out:

"Don't let him do it, Ben! It may be a trick!"

Snarling, Moon jerked out a box of matches and broke the container in his eagerness to strike a light.

"Hey, where's your smoke?" Ben demanded.

Doris leaped forward, brushing the dumbfounded Ben aside, and dashed matches and box from Moon's grasp.

With a cry of mad fury the man flew at her throat, but Dave's fist shot over Doris's shoulder and sent Moon's head backward with a blow on the chin.

"Good, here's some rope," Dave panted, as he snatched up the coil with which Moon had planned to bind Doris and looped coil after coil around the crook's wrists.

"Hey, let me at 'im," piped the old man. "I got a score to settle with that horn-toad."

"You've settled yours, Danny," Ben said. "Keep him covered while I help Dave."

A minute later a dazed Moon was lifted to his feet, hands and arms bound.

"Well, that's that," Dave said, wiping his brow. "Now to get Doris to the ranch and nab the other crooks."

"How did you ever find this place, Dave?" Doris asked, as Ben climbed out of the cave.

"Why, Doris, meet Danny Sumpter! If it had not been for him we wouldn't have found you," Dave exclaimed.

As gravely as if the introduction were being made under the most formal conditions Danny, still holding the rope that bound Moon, lifted his sombrero.

"Pleased to meet you, Madam," he said. "I've heard a lot about you."

Doris laughed at the absurdity of introductions and polite phrases under the circumstances.

"Thank you a million times, Danny Sumpter," she responded. "I'll never forget your kindness."

"No trouble, I'm sure," gravely replied the old man. "I was jest waitin' my chance to get even with Henry Moon here, an' if it be so it helped you out at the same time, why, no extra charge."

"Hey!" bellowed Ben from above. "Do you like it so well down there you ain't a-comin' up?"

Dave assisted Doris through the opening.

"Why, it isn't so dark up here," she exclaimed. "Is it still today or is it tomorrow?"

"Still Monday," Ben observed, hauling on the rope which presently fetched the dazed and unresisting Moon to the surface. "Stand up, you snake!"

Doris gulped in great lungsful of the bracing air, and flung her arms wide.

"Oh, I'm so happy I could sing for joy!" she cried, her face lifted to the crimson afterglow on the eastern peaks.

"Speaking of singing," Dave said, "Miss Bedelle

is up on the road, and I guess Kitty and Marshmallow are there by now, too."

The four and their captive climbed up the face of the slope down which Doris had crept so cautiously hours before, and as they went Dave told Doris how her rescue had been effected.

"I didn't know what had become of you at all," he said. "I even thought you must have slipped into some gully invisible from where we were watching, and had escaped by following it on hands and knees.

"Ben and I were coming down the arroyo, with no idea how to start looking for you, when Danny suddenly dropped down on us from the road. He was with Miss Bedelle, who was looking for her brother, and had met Kitty and Marshmallow. So they followed us and Danny said he bet he knew where you were—in the cave."

"You see," Danny wheezed, "I been a-spyin' on this human cactus, bidin' my good time to git even with him fer stampedin' my horses an' blindin' my pet cayuse. I watched him dodgin' in and out of this holler, a-buildin' of his cave, and once I went down in it after he left to see what mischief was a-doin'. That was before he stocked it with them barrels an' boxes, an' started drillin'."

"What is in the barrels?" Dave asked Moon, who shuffled mutely along at the end of the rope.

"Blasting powder," Doris replied for him.

"Powder and dynamite and stuff like that. That's why I knocked the matches out of his hand. I thought he might be so crazed with rage that he would have willingly blown himself to pieces if he knew we were being killed at the same time."

Dave contemplated the captive crook with horror.

Moon, lifting his bowed head, flashed a look of hatred at Doris that proved him capable of the mad scheme of which she had suspected him.

"Here are the ponies," Dave sighed with relief. "It won't be long before our troubles are over."

CHAPTER XXV

FAREWELL TO RAVEN ROCK

"An' this is Miss Doris Force."

Miss Bedelle thrust out a muscular little hand and grasped Doris's extended one.

Ben, having completed his introductions, busied himself with lashing Moon more securely on the back of the pony.

"Miss Force, you must think this a barbarous corner of the world," the famous opera singer said. "Until this man and his villainous accomplices came here it was ideal. But thanks to you we shall soon be rid of him and his schemes."

"Thanks to me!" Doris repeated. "Thanks to you and your able men, Miss Bedelle. If it had not been for Mr. Sumpter and Mr. Corlies—"

Ben interrupted with a hoot of derision.

"At any rate, this is not an ideal spot for a visit," Lolita Bedelle laughed, putting an arm around Doris's waist. "You must be exhausted and unstrung, you poor thing. I shall drive you to the Saylor's ranch at once. They must be worried.

"Danny, you ride with Ben and take that man to the ranch. Have a guard set over him and in the morning we'll have him jailed properly," the singer

continued. "I'll take Miss Force and Mr. Chamberlin to the Saylor's."

"But Marshmallow and Kitty—" Doris began anxiously, as she seated herself in the roadster.

As if in answer to a summons, the two riders came slowly into the light of the automobile lamps, for it was quite dark by now.

"Ahoy!" Marshmallow called. "Doris there?"

"Here I am, Marshmallow!" Doris cried, jumping out of the car again, and running toward her friends.

"I'd get off, but I could never climb back on this horse again," Marshmallow grinned apologetically.

Kitty, however, was on the ground and had her arms around her chum.

"Dud-dud-d-d—" was all she could say, and burst into tears. "Oh, Dud-dud-Doris!"

Doris embraced her.

"I'm all right, Kitty! Don't cry! I'm the happiest girl in America, for we have Henry Moon a prisoner with enough evidence against him to keep him that way for ages," she laughed.

Dave, at great self-sacrifice, insisted upon letting Doris and Kitty ride together in Miss Bedelle's car, and swung into the saddle of Kitty's horse to clinch the argument.

"Then let us get started," Miss Bedelle suggested.

"Tell Mrs. Saylor to kill a couple of fatted

calves," Marshmallow called out as the car moved past. "Both for me, with lots of gravy."

"You've earned them," Kitty waved back.

Skillfully, Miss Bedelle avoided rocks and holes in the rough trail as she drove swiftly toward the Crazy Bear ranch-house.

"Mr. Speary told me all about you and your quest, Miss Force," she said. "I think I shall call you Doris. May I? I had hoped to ask you to visit my ranch, or to drop in and see you, but I have been very busy, and worried, too."

"I had been hoping to meet you," Doris said shyly.

"You have a charming voice," Miss Bedelle remarked. "Pardon me for being so personal, but I am a singer and I notice such things."

"I hope some day to be a singer," Doris replied.

"Hope!" Kitty exclaimed loyally. "She is a wonderful singer already, Miss Bedelle. She has sung in concerts, and takes lessons all the time."

"Then you must sing for me," Miss Bedelle insisted. "And I shall sing with you. How will that be for a pleasant evening, to make up for the awful one you had tonight?"

"It will make up for everything," Doris breathed. "And for lots more that didn't happen."

"Then suppose we agree that you come to G Clef ranch tomorrow for dinner, all of you," the singer suggested. "We shall sing and talk over many

things. You are such brave and understanding people I wish to discuss something with you that lies very close to my heart. My brother, my poor brother," she added in a low voice. "But here we are! I can't stop for a minute. I'll see you all tomorrow."

As soon as the girls had dismounted in front of the ranch door she whirled her car about and drove off over the road by which she had come.

The door burst open, and Mrs. Mallow ran out.

"Doris? Kitty?" she cried. "Where are the others?"

"The boys are coming along behind," Doris said. "We drove in with Miss Bedelle—and oh, Mrs. Mallow, I have so much to tell you!"

"I have something to tell you, too," Mrs. Mallow said, as she ushered the girls through the door. "There is your uncle, Mr. Trent."

"Uncle John!" Doris cried, as the elderly man, his appearance in no way suggesting the hermit of Cloudy Cove, rose to greet her.

Mrs. Saylor entered the room to announce dinner, but remained to listen breathlessly as Doris and Kitty told the story of the afternoon's adventures.

Dave and Marshmallow arrived before the conclusion of the recital, and added their contributions to it.

Mrs. Mallow and Uncle John were speechless.

They could only look at each other and shake their heads as the story unfolded.

"So now Moon is roped and tied," Marshmallow concluded gleefully.

"Moon said his two accomplices were waiting for him at the well, I remember," Doris said. "Were they there when you came to the cave, Dave?"

"If they were they must have sneaked off when we arrived," Dave said. "I think the town authorities ought to be warned at once."

"I've done so little in this round-up I'll drive down right now and spread the alarm," Marshmallow announced.

"But the car is still in the village," Dave reminded him.

"Take ours," Mrs. Saylor suggested.

"I'll go along," Uncle John said.

The three men darted out of the room, but the girls were content to let them close the drama unassisted.

A soothing bath and change into more feminine garb than the dusty riding habits made as wonderful a difference in Kitty's and Doris's feelings as in their looks.

An hour later the car returned with Dave, Marshmallow, Uncle John and Mr. Saylor, who had accompanied them, to direct them to the right authorities in the little town.

"Success!" shouted Uncle John, as he jumped from the car with a nimbleness belying his years.

"Dave and Marshmallow stood guard at the hotel and Mr. Saylor and I routed out the sheriff and his men," John Trent told the three listeners. "The man they call 'Wolf,' who has the scarred nose, and Tracey, the other one, were in the hotel room, but now they are in a less comfortable room in the town jail. I swore out a warrant charging trespass, assault and battery and everything else I could think of," he chuckled.

"Tomorrow we'll appear against Moon," Dave added.

"If I have finished with supper by then," Marshmallow laughed.

The next morning, after a telephone conversation with G Clef Ranch, Doris and her friends appeared at the court-house and testified against Moon and his two accomplices. The drillers they had employed, catching some rumors of their chief's disgrace, had swiftly left town, but as there was no charge to be brought against them it made no difference.

"If you want to press all those complaints against these men you'll have to stay in Raven Rock until the grand jury meets," the judge told Doris and her uncle. "Suppose instead that I just sentence them each to a year in prison at hard labor, and when you get back to your own state you can press

the charges of assault and robbery against them there.

"Then," he concluded, "the governor of your state can have them extradited, which means brought there to stand trial, and I have no doubt that in the meantime their finger-prints will prove that many another state is looking for the three of them."

It was with considerable satisfaction that Doris and her companions saw the three crooks, handcuffed.

"I'll get even yet," Moon hissed at her out of the corner of his mouth as he was led away.

"Now, then," Doris said, "we'll have to pay one more visit to the cave in the hollow."

"Didn't you see enough of that place?" Dave demanded.

Doris shook her head.

"The precious papers, the deeds and tax receipts for the property, are under a box in the cave where I hid them," she said. "I'm ashamed to say I was so happy at being rescued I forgot to bring them away with me."

It was a crowded day. The documents were found and Uncle John busied himself at the courthouse, having his deeds and those of the Misses Gates recorded. The officials admitted that the tax receipts were genuine, revealing that the tax collector who had held the position of trust for a

generation had fled to Mexico a few months before with a fortune he had accumulated by diverting taxes to his own pocket.

Busy as the day had been, nobody was too weary not to look forward to the evening at Miss Bedelle's ranch.

They found the singer's home to be a magnificent reproduction of an old Spanish-American hacienda, its rooms furnished with priceless antiques and old Indian rugs. It was a museum, in which the exhibits were in daily and intimate use.

Dinner was in Spanish style. Enchilada and tacos, tortillas and chile con carne, dishes familiar and unfamiliar, desert fruits and cactus candy loaded the table spread in the grassy patio where a fountain made silvery music. As a drink there was served delicious iced cocoa in carved calabash gourds with silver mountings, cocoa as the ancient Aztec kings loved it, beaten to a sparkling froth by a "swizzle stick" whirled between the palms of the Mexican servants. Pete Speary, the aviator, was of course among those present.

"Now we will chat a while before we have some music," Miss Bedelle said, leading the way into her spacious, low-ceilinged living room.

"As my new neighbor, Mr. Trent, what do you propose to do with your property?"

Uncle John shook his head.

"I do not know," he said. "I have with me a

power of attorney from the Misses Gates, which Wardell Force sent me, to do with their land as I deem best. I am too old to begin a career as a rancher."

"Don't you intend to complete the drillings and sell your oil?" the singer asked.

"Are you going to drill for oil on your land?" Uncle John asked in turn. "It must be there, as well as on mine."

"No, I certainly do not," Miss Bedelle replied with vigor. "It will not run away. It has been there a million years already."

"Then I shan't," John Trent said. "Oil wells would destroy all the loveliness you have created here."

"Then sell me the property," Miss Bedelle proposed. "Have it appraised, if you wish, with all the extra value the oil gives it, and I will buy at that price."

"You may have it at any price you may set as being fair," John Trent declared. "The Misses Gates and I are in no need of money."

"Then we shall discuss the details later," the singer said. "Doris, won't you sing now? I will accompany you on the piano."

Doris was frightened at the thought of displaying her immature voice before a grand opera star who had received the plaudits of three continents.

What should she sing?

"May I start with something simple?" she asked, looking through the sheaves of music on the piano and selecting "Swanee River."

"One of my favorites," cried Miss Bedelle, as she struck the opening chords.

Doris threw aside her nervousness and began the sweet old song without faltering. At its conclusion Miss Bedelle flashed the girl a smile and played the opening bars of "Old Black Joe," which Doris sang as an encore.

"Splendid!" she cried, rising and leading the applause. "You are gifted with a real voice, Doris! In a year or two you must come to the Metropolitan and I shall arrange an audition for you!"

"Do-do you really think I can hope to sing in opera?" Doris quavered.

"You shall, indeed you shall," Miss Bedelle said with genuine enthusiasm. "I shall be proud to have you as my protegée. Now let us try something operatic."

Doris sang in German and in French, and then Miss Bedelle asked her to play accompaniments for her while the singer rendered some of the more famous of her rôles from grand opera.

"What a magnificent ruby ring," she said suddenly to Doris, while the guests were applauding.

"Sh-sh!" Doris cautioned. "I will tell you about it some other time."

Later in the evening, while the others were chatting together, Miss Bedelle led Doris out of doors, and there the girl told her the story of the ring with which readers of the previous volumes in this series are familiar.

The romantic account finished, Miss Bedelle said that she, too, had a confidence to share with Doris.

"I know of the strange coincidence of my brother being a stowaway on the airplane," she began. "I know you have caught him at other escapades. I must explain for him.

"Charles was a talented and promising boy until his fourteenth year," Miss Bedelle continued. "That was three years ago. Then, in a football game at the prep school to which I sent him—we are orphans like yourself, Doris—his head struck a goal post. For days he was unconscious, and for nearly two years he was an invalid. Then he seemed to recover completely.

"However, the blow did something to warp his poor brain and he has been in one scrape after another ever since. Some of them required every influence I could summon, as well as great sums for damages, to prevent his being sent to prison or the reformatory. Even on his way out here he committed some malicious mischief at Los Lobos which caused me expense and worry. I have just returned from there.

"Now that he is safely in my custody I am going to send him to a sanitarium where the best doctors and surgeons of the country will help restore him to normal young manhood. I just thought I would explain to you. It is really not his fault that he is wild and unruly."

Lolita Bedelle pressed a filmy handkerchief to her eyes. However, when the two singers, the one with many triumphs, the other with her successes still to come, returned to the living room Lolita Bedelle was once more her gay and natural self.

"I must go East to prepare for the coming season," she announced. "In two or three days I shall leave G Clef for the winter. So why should we not make a party of the return East? We'll all fly home together!"

Doris and Kitty and the boys looked at one another with delight, and then turned expectantly toward Mrs. Mallow and John Trent.

"Thank you very much, Miss Bedelle," John Trent said, rising and bowing with old-time courtesy. "I am going directly through to spend some time in Southern California."

"As for me," Mrs. Mallow said, "I am very happy to have had the opportunity to fly out here. But I should be very, very much happier returning by train."

The young folks' faces fell.

"However," added Mrs. Mallow, "if the others

wish to accept your invitation, I have no hesitancy in giving my permission."

"Hoorah!" shouted Marshall.

"Good!" Dave exploded.

"And then for school," Doris cried, turning to Kitty. "Won't we have a story to tell the girls at Barry Manor? It will seem dull there, after this summer, Kitty."

"I don't know," her chum laughed. "I think to be with 'Doris Force at Barry Manor' will prove to be anything but dull."

THE END